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**Civil Rights “Unfinished Business”:
Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign**

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**Civil Rights “Unfinished Business”:
Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign**

by

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Dissertation

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Dedication

This dissertation is written in honor of the individuals who united to protest poverty and racism as part of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign.

It is dedicated to my parents, Richard and Catherine Nathan,
and to my partner, Keith Wright.

Acknowledgements

There are many people to thank who have shaped my five-year-long journey with the Poor People's Campaign and my eight-year-long journey in graduate school, but I must begin by thanking the thousands of individuals who participated in the 1968 Poor People's Campaign and, therefore, made this dissertation possible. In particular, I would like to thank the amazing women and men that I had the pleasure of interviewing in September of 2006. These warm and giving individuals welcomed me into their homes and their lives as if I was a friend rather than a stranger. They shared with me intimate details about their lives and their experiences during the Poor People's Campaign, and for that I am forever grateful. Milton Garrett and Newbern Rooks of Memphis, Tennessee, and Doris Shaw Baker, Bertha Burres Johnson, George Davis, Augusta Denson, Cora Lee Diggs, Samuel McCray, Newbern Rooks, Mary Towner, and Booker Wright, Jr. of Marks, Mississippi have shaped this project in countless ways, and I greatly appreciate both their courage to protest and their willingness to share their stories with me.

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movement affected her life, and her contributions have strengthened this dissertation in important ways.

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While the dissertation would not be possible without the contributions the participants of the Poor People's Campaign made, my graduate school career would not be possible without the support and encouragement I have received from the faculty in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. I began my relationship with this department at the age of eighteen when I enrolled in Mark Smith's Introduction to American Studies and a seminar called The Romantic Myth of the Open Road. I was hooked on American Studies from my first year of college and would like to thank Mark Smith for sparking that initial interest. After completing a degree in English with a minor in American Studies, I returned to the department to finish a second major.

That semester I met Janet Davis, who had just joined the department and was teaching her first seminar on popular culture at the University. Janet's enthusiasm for studying American history and culture and her encouragement of my work drove me to extend my education further and enter graduate school. Since then, Janet has been a constant mentor, role model, confidant, and friend, and I cannot thank her enough for the contributions she has made to this project, to my education, and to my life. She exemplifies the best of academia as a dedicated and ambitious scholar who brings her enthusiasm for her research into the classroom, an energetic and dynamic lecturer who is not afraid to let her guard down (she typically sings for her class at least once a semester), a meticulous and insightful critic, a fair and committed department chair, and a giving and steadfast mentor. Janet has played all of these roles, as well as those of a devoted wife and mother of two, and she has done so with spunk and a level head. She is a down-to-earth, funny, humble individual who has faced many challenges with courage and grace, and I could not ask for a better role model.

My gratitude for my entire dissertation committee runs deep. Along with my amazing chair, Janet Davis, my diverse, interdisciplinary committee have influenced this project in substantial ways. Since I met Jeff Meikle my first year of graduate school he has served as my example of what an accomplished career in the field of American Studies looks like. I've enjoyed getting to know Jeff over the years and have warm memories of happy hour conversations about musicians like Tom Waits, and I greatly appreciate his detailed and precise reading of this dissertation. Shirley Thompson has been wonderful to work with in the classroom, through the orals process, and through each stage of the dissertation. I have had many engaging conversations with Shirley over the years concerning African American history and popular culture, and my dissertation and teaching have both benefited greatly from her influence. Both Shirley and Julia

Mickenberg, like Janet, have been amazing role models as female academics who excel as scholars and teachers while juggling the responsibilities of motherhood. They are a true inspiration! Julia has, pushed me to think critically both during the orals comprehensive exams and dissertation process. She is a rigorous critic and her enthusiasm for the dissertation and contributions to it have meant a great deal to me. Steve Hoelscher has introduced me to the field of cultural geography and has encouraged me to think about the ways in which space and place have shaped the Poor People's Campaign. His influence is evident in the project's emphasis on the relationship between the local and national movements the PPC produced and the analysis of the Campaign's use of national sacred space, and I look forward to investigating further the movement's spatial qualities. Laurie Green has shaped this dissertation in significant ways, and I cannot thank her enough for her guidance as a fellow civil rights scholar. She has pushed my thinking on the historiography of the movement and has helped me to highlight my contribution to the growing body of revisionist scholarship on the civil rights and black power movements.

In addition to my committee, there have been several other scholars who have shaped this project either directly or indirectly. I would like to thank Emilye Crosby both for her encouragement for the project and her comments on chapter five, and for organizing an exciting conference during March of 2006 titled "Local Studies, a National Movement: Toward a Historiography of the Black Freedom Movement." At this conference I met some of the leading revisionist civil rights scholars, such as John Dittmer, Charles Payne, Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, Emilye Crosby, and Todd Moyer. I felt, for the first time, like I was part of a community of scholars with shared ideas about the black freedom struggle. This conference profoundly influenced both my dissertation and my thinking about social movements as a whole.

I would also like to thank two scholars who have shaped my scholarship from afar for years, and who I have had the pleasure of meeting more recently. David Roediger's work has also been influential in my thinking about the relationship between race and class, and his humility and kindness exemplify my ideal of an accomplished scholar. As is evident from the introduction to this dissertation, Robin D.G. Kelley's scholarship has had a profound influence on my thinking about race, class, and gender in the United States. His amazing ability to combine insightful analysis with accessible writing and remarkable wit has inspired me for years. I had the pleasure of meeting Kelley during when he visited UT as a guest lecturer for the Humanities Institute, and his enthusiasm for this project has helped sustain me through the final stretch.

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My time at UT has not only been shaped by amazing faculty, but also by talented and generous graduate students who have made the graduate school experience not just bearable but fun. I would like to thank my first-year crew—Jeff Sprague, Mike McGee, Kim Simpson, and Benita Heiskanen—for helping me survive one of the most difficult

times in my life. A special thanks goes to Benita for keeping me laughing throughout the process! I would also like to thank several other graduate students who I have met along the way. I met Allison Perlman and Bill Bush in Mark Smith's graduate seminar on the cultural history of alcohol and drugs when I was completing my undergraduate degree in American Studies. Since then, they have both become good friends and wonderful colleagues who have pushed me to think critically about issues within the field. Allison has been with me through to the bitter end, and I can't imagine getting through the final stretch without her!! I would also like to thank the members of Janet Davis' dissertation writing group, which included Kim Simpson, Ed Donovan, Clint Starr, Allison Perlman, Phil Tiemeyer, John Gronbeck Tedesco, Jason Mellard, Vicky Hill, and Anna Hadjek-Thompson. I am grateful to Phil and Vicky, in particular, for keeping me calm through the last few months of writing and preparing for the defense and to Vicky for taking copious notes on at the defense. Other graduate students who have made graduate life at UT a wonderful experience include Tony Fassi, Danny Gerling, Mike O'Connor, Holly Alloway, Kimberly Hamlin, Stephanie Kohlberg, Rebecca Onion, Mittie Jones, Jennifer Johnson, Tracy Wuster, Audrey Russek, Amy Ware, Andy Jones, and Angie Maxwell.

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My parents have been amazing role models, and I wish them all of the joy and happiness that they deserve after a lifetime of serving others.

I could not have made it through graduate school or completed this project without my partner in life, Keith Wright. In the past decade, I have seen us both grow and change in remarkable ways, and I am excited each day to see where life takes us in the future. I cannot express the extent of my gratitude for the love and support Keith has given me. He has kept me grounded and laughing throughout many stressful periods, and he has been a constant source of both love and inspiration.

**Civil Rights “Unfinished Business”:
Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign**

Publication No. _____

Amy Nathan Wright, Ph.D.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2007

Supervisor: Janet M. Davis

In May 1968, a racially, geographically, and politically diverse coalition of poor people joined forces to make themselves visible to the nation and protest the unseen poverty they suffered from on a daily basis. Under the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) between 3,000 and 5,000 African American, Mexican American, American Indian, Puerto Rican, and white Appalachian poor people caravanned to Washington, D.C., and built a temporary city—Resurrection City—on the symbolic space of the National Mall, where they remained for over six weeks as part of the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign. The caravans and temporary shantytown brought poverty into the national spotlight, exposing the bleak conditions impoverished people experienced on a daily basis. In Resurrection City volunteers provided participants with social services and basic necessities they lacked at home, while participants conducted daily protests at nearby government agencies, demanding assistance for the basic needs

of housing, food, and jobs. The ultimate goal of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign was to produce a radical redistribution of wealth in the U.S., but most involved in the movement hoped, if nothing more, to expose the pervasiveness of poverty and persuade Congress to fund new programs and improve the administration and benefits of existing ones. This radical social experiment was the first national, multiracial anti-poverty movement of the era, yet it has received scant scholarly attention. "Civil Rights' 'Unfinished Business'" provides a comprehensive narrative of this significant yet neglected movement that reveals the complexity of national, grassroots, multiracial, class-based activism that challenged the nation to face the problem of poverty during the most tumultuous years of the era. Civil rights scholars tend to dismissively characterize the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) as the last gasp of the civil rights movement—a failed campaign with no substantial lasting consequences. However, this dissertation argues that rather than simply being Martin Luther King Jr.'s "last crusade," the PPC represents civil rights' "unfinished business." The problems this campaign tried to address—hunger, joblessness, homelessness, inadequate health care, a failed welfare system—still persist, and people of color, particularly women and children, continue to experience poverty and its effects disproportionately.

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Introduction

During the summer of 1968, between 3,000 and 5,000 African American, Mexican American, American Indian, Puerto Rican, and white Appalachian poor people caravanned to Washington, D.C., and built a temporary city—Resurrection City—on the symbolic space of the National Mall. They remained there for six weeks as part of the Poor People’s Campaign, a multiracial social movement of the poor, under the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The caravans and temporary shantytown brought poverty into the national spotlight, exposing the bleak conditions impoverished people experienced on a daily basis. In Resurrection City, volunteers provided participants with social services and basic necessities they lacked at home, while participants conducted daily protests at nearby government agencies, demanding assistance for the basic needs of housing, food, and jobs. The ultimate goal of this movement was to produce a radical redistribution of wealth in the U.S. But most involved in the movement hoped, if nothing more, to expose the pervasiveness of poverty and to persuade Congress to fund new programs and improve the administration and benefits of existing ones.

This radical social experiment was the first national, multiracial anti-poverty movement of the era. However, journalists and scholars alike have, until recently, either ignored or maligned the Poor People’s Campaign (PPC). I first discovered the PPC when searching for a topic for my final research paper in Janet Davis’ graduate seminar, *Twentieth Century Social Movements*. The civil rights and black power movements had deeply moved me since I was a child, and after reading Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle*,

Komozi Woodard's *A Nation Within a Nation*, and Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* my interest in these movements intensified. I decided to watch some of the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary to help me choose a topic and ended up watching the entire series.

The fourth episode of the second series of *Eyes on the Prize*, "The Promised Land, 1967-1968" begins with Martin Luther King, Jr. recounting the promises our founding fathers made in the *Declaration of Independence*:

"We read one day, we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty. And the possibility for the pursuit of happiness, he merely exists."¹

Portraying King as an anti-poverty warrior who argued for guaranteed jobs and income as a basic right, the documentary shows him delivering a speech in which he attributes the failures of the War on Poverty to the prohibitively costly Vietnam War. After detailing King's initial plans for the Poor People's Campaign and the opposition he faced within his own ranks, the episode explores his involvement in the Memphis Sanitation Worker's Strike, which he insisted was a local example of the PPC's broader goals. While many histories of the civil rights movement end with Dr. King's death on April 4, 1968, *Eyes on the Prize* demonstrates that the movement survived despite the assassination of its most prominent leader.

The episode displays images of black, white, Chicano, and American Indian participants boarding buses in New York, in Mississippi, and in New Mexico, illustrating that the PPC was a truly national, multiracial campaign. Rev. Ralph Abernathy and

Hosea Williams lead singing marchers behind the most dramatic of the caravans—the Mule Train, a procession of some fifteen mule-drawn covered wagons. A crowd of participants shouting “freedom, freedom, freedom” surround Rev. Abernathy as he pounds in the first stake and declares the nationally revered space of the National Mall as the site for the PPC’s temporary city, “Resurrection City, U.S.A.”² Regionally and ethnically diverse participants are seen working together to build the A-frame wooden tents where they would live, demonstrating the PPC’s transformation from several local campaigns into a unified, national movement. The movement’s ethnoracial and political diversity is displayed through the Spanish slogans, anti-war labels like “Peace Brothers,” and messages of black pride, such as “Black is Good,” and “Malcolm X Shabazz Center Black Brother,” that participants painted on their huts. While the prideful slogans on the huts helped communicate participants’ identities, the music of another participant, Rev. Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick, explains why the poor were there: “Went to Washington feeling mighty sad, thinking about an income that I never had. Everybody’s got a right to live. Everybody’s got a right to live.”³

In Resurrection City, one sees participants working together to build the city, volunteers from the Seventh Day Adventists Welfare Services handing out donated clothing, doctors performing dental and medical check-ups, children coloring at the city’s Freedom School, and an interracial group of volunteers making bread at the Diggers’ free

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., “The Promised Land, 1967-1968,” *Eyes on the Prize II*, Episode 4 (Boston: Blackside Productions, 1990).

² Ralph Abernathy quoted in “The Promised Land, 1967-1968.”

³ Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick, “Everybody’s Got A Right to Live” played in “The Promised Land, 1967-1968.”

bakery, the side of which read “Bread: Free Forever Give Us This Day.” A middle-aged black woman from Mississippi gives her opinion on life in Resurrection City: “I’m doing much better than I was doing in Mississippi and I’m going to stay here if it’s His will until I receive what I came for.”⁴ While Resurrection City provided PPC members with unprecedented access to healthcare, education, and shelter and fostered a remarkable multiracial community, PPC participants also displayed their unity through creative protests to demand their basic needs as rights. For instance, Jesse Jackson is seen leading participants through a lunch line at the Department of Agriculture to protest of the lack of government-funded commodities and food stamps.

When I began to research the PPC, instead of discovering stories that fit with these images, I found descriptions of muddy, bedraggled poor people living in a shantytown steeped in torrential rains. Despite the campaign’s ethnoracial, geographical, and political diversity, Resurrection City’s remarkable resources, or the vigorous and creative agency of the participants themselves, images of chaos and failure dominated virtually all accounts of the PPC. Disheartening and sometimes degrading depictions of the PPC and its participants dominated the press coverage and even scholarly treatments of the campaign, obscuring the campaign’s emphasis on combating poverty. While I recognized the campaign’s serious flaws, I could not understand why I had never heard of what seemed to be a remarkable movement and why scholarly and press accounts of the PPC were so negative. The more I explored, I found that those most intimately involved in the movement readily recognized its significance. For instance, toward the end of the *Eyes on the Prize* episode, one of the visionaries of the PPC provides a different

⁴ Anonymous woman quoted in “The Promised Land, 1967-1968.”

interpretation of the movement other than that of a failed campaign. Marian Wright Edelman explains,

“1968 was an extraordinarily difficult year . . . for those of us who were determined to carry on the legacy of Martin, it was a time to regroup and rethink and get up and figure out new strategies, to build new paths towards the future, to deal with the issues of poverty and deal with the issues of race that were going to be ongoing, but clearly much more difficult.”⁵

For Edelman, the PPC signaled a time of transformation and represented an attempt to address extremely complex and ongoing problems that have yet to be solved.

“Civil Rights’ ‘Unfinished Business’: Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign” provides a comprehensive analysis of this significant yet neglected movement and reveals the complexity of national, grassroots, multiracial, class-based activism. The PPC challenged the nation to face the problem of poverty during one of the most tumultuous years of the era. Many journalists and civil rights scholars have dismissively characterized the Poor People’s Campaign as the last gasp of the civil rights movement—a failed campaign with no substantial lasting consequences.⁶ Other scholars have provided important details about the PPC’s early stages, but end their narratives King’s assassination without explaining the future of the movement.⁷ This dissertation argues

⁵ Marian Wright Edelman quoted in “The Promised Land, 1967-1968.”

⁶ See Charles Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection: The Poor People’s Washington Campaign* (Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969); Robert T. Chase, “Class Resurrection: The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City” *Essays in History* Volume 40 (Corcoran Dept. of History, University of Virginia Press, 1998). Here are just a small spattering of the numerous responses from the press condemning the campaign: “‘Poor March’ on Washington: A City Braced for Trouble” *U.S. News and World Report* (May 20, 1968): 11, 47-49; “Insurrection City” *Time* (June 14, 1968); Tom Kahn, “Why the Poor People’s Campaign Failed,” *Commentary* (Sept 1968): 50-55.

⁷ Two of the most prominent examples of this approach are David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1986) and Taylor Branch’s three-part series, *America in the King Years*, both of which detail the build up to the PPC but end with King’s death on April 4, 1968. I was excited

that rather than simply being Dr. King's "last crusade,"⁸ the PPC represents civil rights' "unfinished business." The problems this campaign addressed—hunger, joblessness, homelessness, inadequate health care, a failed welfare system—still persist and people of color, particularly women and children, continue to experience poverty and its effects disproportionately.⁹

The PPC serves as a microcosm of a time of transformation during the late 1960s and early 1970s when the black freedom struggle was changing shape and new movements, such as the Chicano and American Indian Movements, were emerging in full force. The decorations of the A-frame huts with slogans, such as "Soul Power," "Indian Power," "Chicano Power, and the white Appalachian motto "Sol Power" illustrate the participants' diverse ethnic identities and political affiliations. The participants' decorated homes reflected heightened emphasis on identity and the growing importance of self-determination and cultural expressions for the burgeoning identity-based movements of the era. As a multiracial campaign that struggled to maintain unity, the PPC provides a lens through which to explore the emergence of "identity politics" during the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the PPC sheds new light on the culture wars of the 1980s

for Branch's final book in the trilogy, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68*, to be released, thinking it would provide a rich account of the PPC, yet in an approximately 500 page book, the PPC appears on only a few pages. See *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

⁸ See Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the F.B.I. and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998). McKnight makes an important contribution by outlining how the government, the FBI in particular, surveyed, infiltrated, and disrupted the Poor People's Campaign, as well as the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike. He provides significant details about the PPC's inner-workings in the process, but his focus remains on explaining why the movement failed.

⁹ Obviously, more widely recognized civil rights' issues, like segregation and disenfranchisement, have also persisted, despite the passage of federal legislation to prohibit, or at least ameliorate, these national problems.

and 1990s by illuminating both the rewards and limitations of different groups working across racial lines.

As a national, multiracial campaign for economic rights, the PPC does not fit the image most Americans have of the civil rights movement. Despite the efforts of countless revisionist scholars, a master-narrative still dominates popular perceptions of civil rights. Students enter my classes on civil rights and black power with little knowledge about these movements, aside from the images the media recycles each February during Black History Month. When my students have interviewed local seniors about their memories of the movement for an oral history project, they typically repeat the same refrain my students offer at the beginning of each semester: They know of Rosa Parks' famous sit-in on the bus that "initiated" the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington, and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.¹⁰ Some have heard of Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party, but most know black power only through its images and rhetoric.

The PPC is often dismissed or even absent from the historiography of the civil rights movement because it challenges popular perceptions of both poverty and civil rights. As a multiracial campaign of poor people from all over the nation, the PPC disrupts images of civil rights as solely southern and primarily black and white. As an antipoverty campaign that placed racial and economic discrimination at the center of its critique, this movement challenges depictions of civil rights activists as being solely

concerned with integration and voting rights. As a national movement that included radicals and moderates, young and old, the religious and the secular, the PPC straddles the line between the two strands of the black freedom struggle. The PPC shared many of the same goals as black power groups, such as ending hunger and joblessness. Placing the PPC at the center of civil rights history rather than at its periphery challenges myths about the civil rights movements and disrupts the stark dichotomies some historians have made between civil rights and black power.¹¹

Early scholars of the movement perpetuated popular images of a solely southern reformist movement led by liberal whites and moderate blacks that succeeded with the passage of the mid-1960s civil rights legislation. The biographies of Dr. King that dominated the initial historiography of civil rights obscured the work of grassroots activists in favor of national events and legislative successes, often attributed to King. The histories of the foremost movement organizations focused on a wider range of civil rights leaders and events,¹² but until fairly recently, scholars had largely ignored local,

¹⁰ For a similar account, see Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), xiii.

¹¹ While black power advocates are often thought of as separatists, some groups, most notably the Black Panther Party, had extensive ties with and an incredible influence on several emerging identity-based movements, such as the American Indian Movement and the Chicano Movement. See chapter 6 in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak* (Philadelphia: Lipincott Press, 1970); as well as chapter 6 in Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), as well as Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Kathleen Cleaver, ed., *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹² Four of the “Big Five”—CORE, SNCC, SCLC, and the NUL—have received considerable scholarly attention. See August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: New York University Press, 1973); Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*

grassroots movements or campaigns that did not fit the mold of reformist desegregation or voting rights protests. But in the last two decades there has been an explosion of revisionist civil rights scholarship. Some of the earliest revisionist work made an important intervention by including women's daily grassroots activism and demonstrating how women shaped the tactics and goals of the movement and facilitated its growth.¹³ A number of recent studies have reevaluated nationally recognized events,

(New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1986); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Thomas R. Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); Jesse Thomas Moore, *Search for Equality: The National Urban League, 1910-61* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981). Interestingly, until very recently the oldest and most prominent organization, the NAACP, had not received much scholarly attention. See Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: the NAACP and the struggle for Black Political Integration*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005) and Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: the NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (New York: Routledge, 2005). SNCC has also been the subject of several recent works, such as Wesley C. Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Vanessa Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

¹³ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf 1979); Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline A. Rouse and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishers, 1990); Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999); V.P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Gail Schmunk Murray, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005);

demonstrating the grassroots efforts that made them possible and situating them within the longer local histories that produced the conditions for these major events to transpire.¹⁴ Other significant trends include greater emphasis on the white backlash that occurred in response to the movements of the post-World War II era,¹⁵ the influences of international affairs on domestic activism,¹⁶ and the role of the media and the significance of cultural productions for the civil rights and black power movements.¹⁷ While these

Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham, 2005).

¹⁴ See Patrick Henry Bass, *Like a Mighty Stream: The March on Washington, August 28, 1963* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2002); Herbert R. Kohl, *She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell the Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2005); Sandra Adickes, *Legacy of a Freedom School* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Russell Freedman, *Freedom Walkers: the Story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (New York: Holiday House, 2006); Donnie Williams, *The Thunder of Angels: the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People Who Broke the Back of Jim Crow* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2006); Lee Sartain, *Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1915-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ David Mark Chalmers, *Backfire: How the Ku Klux Klan Helped the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: the White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

¹⁶ Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed. *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Kevin Kelly Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Gene Roberts, *The Race Beat: the Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Vanessa Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002); Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.:

trends have filled important gaps in the historiography, the explosion of local studies in the past twenty years has arguably had the greatest effect on rewriting the history of civil rights.

In 1994, John Dittmer set the standard for local studies with his *Local People*.¹⁸ Charles Payne suggests that *Local People*'s greatest accomplishment was, "that it is profoundly respectful, respectful of both the complexity of the people and the politics, and of the possibilities and limitations of historical situations."¹⁹ Payne employed these same principles in his own brilliant work on the movement in Mississippi, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, which appeared the following year and more directly addressed how local histories shape our perception of the national civil rights narrative.²⁰ In the last decade, countless revisionist scholars have followed in the footsteps of Dittmer and Payne in the pursuit of creating more complete and complex narratives of the black

Princeton University Press, 2003); Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, and the Soul of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, & Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*; see also Brian Ward, ed., *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001).

¹⁸ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994). Other important precursors include William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984). Morris includes a number of significant local movements that are often left out of the master-narrative of civil rights, such as the Baton Rouge bus boycott, which preceded the more well known Montgomery boycott.

¹⁹ Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, ed., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), xv.

freedom struggle by producing historically grounded local studies. Some have remained in the South, exploring in great detail the local movements in Mississippi,²¹ in Alabama,²² in the big cities of the South,²³ and in the border regions of the South.²⁴ While southern movements still dominate the historiography of civil rights, scholars have demonstrated

²⁰ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²¹ J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²² Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Thornton Mills, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Bobby M. Wilson, *Race and Place in Birmingham: The Civil Rights and Neighborhood Movements* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Charles E. Connerly, *"The Most Segregated City in America": City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

²³ Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Glenda Alice Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); John A. Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas 1940-1970* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

²⁴ Peter B. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street: The Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Andrew H. Myers, *Black, White, & Olive Drab: Racial Integration at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Peter F. Lau, *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality Since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006); Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: a Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005); Samuel C. Hyde, ed., *Sunbelt Revolution: the Historical Progression of the Civil Rights Struggle in the Gulf South, 1866-2000* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2001).

the importance of exploring the movements of the Northeast,²⁵ the Midwest,²⁶ and the Southwest²⁷ to grasp the truly national reach of the movement and how geographical location shaped individual campaigns and movement organizations. These local studies have highlighted the role women activists have played, demonstrated the false dichotomies between non-violence and self-defense,²⁸ and illustrated the regional diversity of activism, highlighting the particular local circumstances that produced each

²⁵ Marha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Post-War New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Jeanne Theoharis, "'They Told Us Our Kids Were Stupid': Ruth Batson and the Educational Movement in Boston," in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

²⁶ James R. Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita--the Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest, 1954-72* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Richard B. Pierce, *Polite Protest: the Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Randal Maurice Jelks, *African Americans in the Furniture City: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Grand Rapids* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Kenneth S. Jolly, *Black Liberation in the Midwest: the Struggle in St. Louis, Missouri, 1964-1970* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

²⁷ Matthew C. Whitaker, *Race Work: the Rise of Civil Rights in the Urban West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jeanne Theoharis, "'Alabama on Avalon': Rethinking the Watts Uprising and the Character of Black Protest in Los Angeles," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, edited by Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006): 27-54; Thomas R. Cole, *No Color is My Kind: the Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); William Henry Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Robert J. Robertson, *Fair Ways: How Six Black Golfers Won Civil Rights in Beaumont, Texas* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005).

²⁸ Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Lance E. Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004); Christopher B. Strain, *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

unique movement. Collectively, these local studies and other revisionist trends in civil rights and black power historiography have produced a more inclusive and diverse image of activists and a more extensive timeframe for the black freedom struggles of the twentieth century.²⁹ Many of these local studies, particularly those that explore urban movements outside of the South, have given greater attention to the relationship between civil rights and economic rights by highlighting anti-poverty campaigns,³⁰ labor unions,³¹

²⁹ See Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Adam Fairclough, "State of the Art: Historian and the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American Studies* (24, 1990); Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review* (96, 1991); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); John Eagerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Timothy Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History* 85, 2, (September, 1998): 540-570; Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History*, 66 (2000); Van Gosse, "A Movements of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left," in *A Companion to Post-1945 American*, Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002): 277-302; Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91 (March 2005): 1233-1263; Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁰ Tomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jeanne Theoharis, "'They Told Us Our Kids Were Stupid': Ruth Batson and the Educational Movement in Boston," in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Dona C. Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda: Race and Social Welfare Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³¹ Zaragoza Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Vanessa Tait, *Poor Workers' Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005); Paul D. Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor: a New History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

and welfare rights movements³² as part of the broader freedom struggles of the post-World War II era. Yet, most of these works do not connect individual local movements with the national civil rights movement; nor do they explore the interconnections of specific local movements with those of other ethnoracial groups.

This study of the PPC situates itself within a growing body of literature that employs a bottom-up approach to explore the efforts of grassroots activists across the nation. The PPC existed simultaneously as a national and local grassroots movement. Therefore, this dissertation contributes to civil rights historiography by analyzing the relationship between the several local, grassroots movements the PPC either emboldened or inspired and the national anti-poverty campaign in Washington. This analysis of a multiracial anti-poverty movement, its caravan across the country, its use of a national, sacred space for their protest, and its construction of a temporary, functioning city in the heart of the National Mall demonstrates the importance of both space and place in social movements and how space and place affect race, class and other aspects of identity.

³² Scholars who study the War on Poverty were some of the first to recognize the connections between welfare rights organizations and civil rights activists. See Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For sources on welfare rights, see Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981); Jennifer Frost, *"An Interracial Movement of the Poor": Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Felicia Kornbluh, "Black Buying Power: Welfare Rights, Consumerism, and Northern Protest" in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, Jeanne E. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds. (New York: Plagrave Macmillan, 2003) and *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2005); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

This project also hopes to contribute to the growing fields of cultural geography and urban planning. By employing theories of space and place, my goal is to better understand how a group's place of origin affected their goals and tactics and how these might have been challenged or adapted once these various groups converged together on the National Mall. By exploring the construction of a temporary city in just a few days, analyzing the plans and design of Resurrection City and how they affected the City's functions throughout its existence, and illustrating how building their new homes and participating in city functions affected participants, we can better understand the complications and rewards of meeting a diverse population's needs in a city setting.

"Civil Rights' 'Unfinished Business'" also seeks to contribute to the fields of social movement studies and of American Studies. This historical analysis of the PPC provides insight into how a social movement of the poor functions, the role of leadership in social movements, the power of creative and sustained protest, the complications and potential rewards of working across racial and class lines, and the effects of the United States government's surveillance of the social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This dissertation is also an attempt to insert the history and experiences of a population that scholars, and society in general, typically ignore. American Studies scholars have given great attention to labor movements and working class culture, but those who live in total poverty remain virtually absent.³³

³³ A basic search on the JSTOR database revealed only 56 articles with poverty in the title appeared, none of which were published in *American Quarterly*; the journals that appeared most frequently were the *Journal of Economic History* (9), *The Economic History Review* (5), *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (4), *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (4), *Economic Geography* (3), *Journal of American History* (2); of the 56 articles, 15 of them appeared in journals dealing with Modern Africa, South Africa, and African History. Of the

The PPC also challenges popular perceptions of late 1960s social movements as rife with divisive “identity politics.” This study embraces the goals of Ethnic Studies in its attempt to understand the relationship between the various ethnoracial groups that joined the PPC. Although liberal whites had worked closely with several civil rights organizations, the PPC marked the first time the SCLC, and King in particular, formed alliances with other minority groups. While these groups had very different agendas and tactics, they all shared the plight of poverty. As the foremost national, multiracial antipoverty movement of the era, the PPC served as an important organizing moment for burgeoning identity-based social movements, such as the Chicano Movement and the American Indian Movement. The PPC provided the space for regionally and racially diverse activists to come together in a national setting to discuss their goals and tactics and to establish contact with activists from distant regions. Yet none of the current studies explore the ways in which the PPC shaped other social movements.

During the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, many liberal white academics went head-to-head with radical leftist scholars of color regarding the primacy of race, and/or gender versus class. In *Yo Mama’s Dysfunctional*, Robin D.G. Kelley challenges “renegades of the New Left,” primarily white male activists/cultural critics/scholars, such as Todd Gitlin, Michael Tomasky, Richard Rorty, Jim Sleeper, Eric Hobsbawn and others who argue that identity politics have derailed a more unifying focus on class.³⁴ Kelley argues instead that this backlash reflects a personal “sense of loss or irrelevance” and

hundreds of papers scheduled for this year’s ASA national meeting, there are only two that mention poverty in their titles.

³⁴ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunkiona!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 104.

“white male angst,” and a failure to recognize that these movements challenged the economic system and its exploitation of people based on race, gender, sexuality, and regional identity.³⁵ In his most recent work, *Freedom Dreams*, Kelley challenges those who dismiss any movement that has been unable to meet its goals, no matter how ambitious:

Unfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they ‘succeeded’ in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change.³⁶

Kelley’s statement does not mean to suggest that all social movements succeed simply by existing. Instead, he argues that some social movements generate ideas that are so radical that they alter the way people think and inspire subsequent generations to act. The Poor People’s Campaign serves as a model of a multiracial, class-based movement of the poor that challenged the government to provide a guaranteed job or income as a basic civil right and moved future generations to replicate its tactics.³⁷

The primary reason why the PPC is often dismissed in the historiography of the civil rights movement is that most popular and scholarly accounts have declared the campaign a failure.³⁸ Only a few journalists noted any positive aspects of the

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

³⁶ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

³⁷ See conclusion for a more detailed discussion of the legacy of the PPC for other social movements.

³⁸ See: “Some Gains for ‘Poor Marchers,’ But Their Troubles Grow” *U.S. News and World Report*, June 10, 1968, 60-61; “Moving Forward together” *The New Republic*, June 29, 1968, 5; “As the ‘Poor Crusade’ Takes a New Turn” *U.S. News and World Report*, July 1, 1968, 27-29.

campaign.³⁹ Yet movement leaders and participants offered favorable assessments of the campaign. To date, there have been only two books and a few scholarly articles that study the Poor People's Campaign in any depth, and each of these presents a different explanation for the PPC's perceived failure. In *Uncertain Resurrection: The Poor People's Washington Campaign*, journalist Charles Fager chronicles the campaign from its planning stages through the fall of Resurrection City, arguing that social movements must be both morally engaging and entertaining to succeed. He asserts that the PPC failed on both counts, largely due to an uneasy relationship with the press, the failings of SCLC's leadership, fighting and competition between the different ethno-racial groups, and a general lack of excitement compared to the southern direct action campaigns of the early 1960s.⁴⁰ In *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign*, historian Gerald D. McKnight argues that the PPC failed due to the government's intense surveillance and infiltration of the movement.⁴¹ In a more recent article on the campaign, Robert T. Chase still characterizes the PPC as a failure, which he attributes to a lack of support from white liberals owing to the movement's focus on economic equality rather than issues of racial discrimination. All of these accounts deem

³⁹ John Neary, "A New Resolve: Never to Be Invisible Again" *Life* 64, 26, June 28, 1968; Michael Harrington, "The Will to Abolish Poverty" *Saturday Review*, July 27, 1968, 10-14; Jesse Jackson, "Resurrection City: The Dream . . . The Accomplishments" *Ebony*, October 1968, 65-70; Carolyn O. Atkinson, "Coalition Building and Mobilization Against Poverty," *The American Behavioral Scientist* 12, 2, (Nov/Dec 1968): 48-52.

⁴⁰ One reason the PPC held less "entertainment value" than some of SCLC's previous campaigns was that there was no clear enemy to pit the nation against. The PPC's target, the national government, was much harder to rally people against than an explicitly racist and violent person, like the infamous Eugene "Bull" O'Connor of Birmingham, Alabama.

⁴¹ McKnight makes use of FBI and State Department documents to chronicle the surveillance of the PPC, but he fails to make use of the extensive archival material available at the King Center, which includes SCLC and several other civil rights organizations documents, and rarely does he address the goals, actions, and results of the Campaign itself.

the campaign a failure, but none have considered the movement from the perspective of the organizers, or, most importantly, from that of the participants themselves.

The overwhelming focus on the negative aspects of this campaign still begs the following questions: How are we to judge the effectiveness of a movement of poor people when there are few similar comparable movements? Why was a poor people's movement necessary when the government had declared war on poverty? Why were other anti-poverty movements incapable of grasping the nation's attention? How does a movement of poor people differ from other types of social movements since the poor tend to have the least contact with their political representatives? And is there a more useful method for studying social movements than an evaluative model?

Rather than explaining why the PPC was a failure, "Civil Rights' 'Unfinished Business'" explains why things happened the way they did. Few of the existing studies of the PPC even begin to consider what the campaign did for the poor people who participated in it.⁴² The participation of thousands of poor people in a six-week national protest defies popular representations of the poor as lazy and apathetic. While most histories of social movements focus their attention on movement leaders, this study places the participants of the PPC at the center to better understand the relationships between the participants, the leadership, the press, and the government. "Civil Rights' 'Unfinished Business'" seeks to embrace Robin Kelley's challenge to historians in his classic text, *Race Rebels*, to tell history "from way, way below":

⁴² The one author who has conducted extensive interviews with participants and has considered how the PPC affected their lives is photographer Roland Freeman. See Roland Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998).

To make sense of people where they are rather than where we would like them to be . . . to break down the iron triangle by refusing to privilege race, class, or gender; to reject formulaic interpretations in favor of the complexity of lived experience; to erase boundaries between social, cultural, [intellectual] and political history; to pay attention to cultural hybridity; and reject the kind of subtle essentialism that treats African American [or any other] culture in the singular.⁴³

This study challenges those who would have us choose class over race, race over gender, or gender over class as *the* defining characteristic of identity and discrimination. And by rejecting behavioral and cultural explanations for poverty in favor of grounded, historical, structural ones, this history of the PPC provides a counter discourse to the pervasive “culture of poverty” characterizations of the poor as pathological and incompetent.

Throughout, the dissertation explores the following questions: How can we better understand the intersections of race, class, and gender by studying this movement? How does our perception of this campaign change if the focus is shifted away from the perspective of the authorities and the press, to that of the participants themselves? How did the poor people’s performance of their poverty in their temporary shantytown influence broader perceptions of the campaign and both the public and the government’s response to the poor people’s demands? What is the significance of space and place when one is fighting for one’s rights? How did the PPC’s occupation of the “sacred space” of the National Mall influence the responses of governmental officials to the poor people’s demand?

In the following pages, I attempt to respond to these questions through an interdisciplinary analysis of the PPC that is rooted in the methodologies of American Studies, cultural studies, African American Studies, social and cultural history, and

⁴³ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working-Class* (New York:

cultural geography. “Civil Rights’ ‘Unfinished Business,’” examines the inner-workings of each stage of the Poor People’s Campaign and places these perspectives in conversation with each other, fostering a richer and more complete analysis of this important campaign that demonstrates both the rewards and complications of conducting a national multiracial economic rights movement. By focusing on the experiences of the impoverished participants, this study strives to explain partially why a disproportionate number of poor people in this country have been and continue to be people of color, and why the overwhelming majority are women and children. The dissertation also explores the complications and rewards activists experienced when working across racial, class, gender, and organizational boundaries and how their involvement with the PPC influenced American Indians, Puerto Ricans, white Appalachian and Chicano activists in their subsequent organizing efforts. While the white Appalachian participants might not seem to fit within this paradigm, I employ the work of recent whiteness studies scholars to better understand the ways in which poor whites are discriminated against due to their racial and class identity with pejoratives like “white trash.”⁴⁴

In addition to analyzing the organizational aspects of the campaign and critiquing the protest methods employed, this study of the PPC also explores the cultural elements

The Free Press, 1994), 13.

⁴⁴ See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Benefit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1998); and John Hartigan, *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1999) and *Odd Tribes: A Cultural Analysis of White People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

of the campaign. Using the methods of cultural studies, I read this social movement as a cultural text: thinking about its production, distribution (enactment), and reception. By considering all phases of the PPC rather than simply its reception, “Civil Rights’ ‘Unfinished Business,’” provides a fuller and more complex narrative of the campaign, while demonstrating the ways in which this social movement also functioned, for some, as a form of popular culture. Like scholars such as Robin Kelley and Janet Davis, who analyze the performative aspects of labor, I analyze the performance of poverty, considering the ways in which this protest served as a *both* labor and leisure, protest and play.⁴⁵ The point of the PPC was to dramatize poverty and to make it visible; thus I consider how the participants’ appearance, language, attitude, and performance of identity affected the movement’s overall outcome.

Some may question whether a civil rights campaign that seemingly lasted from May 12 to June 24, 1968, warrants a book-length study. However, the PPC was a radical social experiment that exposed the reality and persistence of poverty. By placing the PPC within its broader historical context and providing an in-depth analysis of all components of the campaign, rather than simply narrating the rise and fall of Resurrection City, it becomes clear that this multifaceted local, regional, and national movement was both an outgrowth of the social justice movements that preceded it, and a foundation for those that followed. The participants’ willingness to abandon their normal day-to-day lives and to stay in Washington in their temporary shantytown reveals both their commitment to improving their lives and that many had little to lose and much to

⁴⁵ I am also interested in performance theory and how it might contribute to my analysis of the performance of poverty. See Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 1-53; Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture*

gain by making the trip. This dissertation is an attempt to give voice to a population that continues to be ignored and invisible and to recover a movement that demonstrates what poor people can do for themselves if given the opportunity.

There is an assumption among historians that the civil rights organizations did not begin to address economic issues until the mid-to-late 1960s, but as Part One reveals, civil rights groups, including SCLC, have a long history of combating racial and economic issues since the two are structurally linked. Employing what Dona and Charles Hamilton have termed “the dual agenda,” chapter one explores groups in the post-World War II era that exposed and protested the economic exploitation and racial discrimination that caused people of color to be disproportionately poor. This chapter also provides the immediate historical context out of which the PPC emerged, briefly exploring the rediscovery of poverty in the early 1960s, the creation of the War on Poverty, and the emergence of a welfare rights movement during the mid-1960s. The following chapter explores how King and SCLC pursued a dual agenda in the late 1960s and analyzes the genesis of the Poor People’s Campaign. Chapter two seeks to understand the effects of the campaign’s early organizing efforts on its overall outcome and to better understand how a multiracial movement based on class emerges. With little knowledge or previous experience working with Latinos and American Indians, King and SCLC faced the considerable challenge of mobilizing the entire nation for the PPC, forming new alliances, and organizing local grassroots movements in new places.

After exploring the roots of the PPC, Part Two: Poverty & Mobility analyzes three groups of caravans to the capital—the Committee of 100’s lobbying caravan

through the capital, eight of the regional caravans, and the final and most dramatic of the caravans, the Mule Train. Chapter three begins with the initial encounters of the various regional and ethnoracial groups involved in the PPC at the Minority Meeting in Atlanta where participants first met to discuss their plans for the PPC and elect their representatives who would serve on the Committee of 100. During the late days of April and first days of May, this multiracial coalition of approximately 150 participants and PPC leaders caravanned to and through the capital where they presented their demands to various government agencies. This lobbying caravan enabled the campaign to present their demands publicly and provide the government with the opportunity to respond before launching the second stage of the PPC—the construction of a shantytown to display poverty in the nation’s capital. The government failed to respond to the initial demands, and Dr. King’s death inspired greater participation than previously expected.

Chapter four analyzes the movement and meaning of eight of the nine regional caravans that eventually convened in Washington D.C. where participants settled into new homes in Resurrection City. Important coalitions were formed along the way to D.C., but activists tended to stick with people who shared the same ethno-racial background once in Washington and struggled to remain united once in the large and chaotic shantytown.

Marks, Mississippi—where the plight of the southern poor first moved King to take action—was also the launching pad for the most dramatic of the caravans, the Mule Train, the subject of chapter five. This caravan of mule-drawn covered wagons symbolized the fact that poor southerners’ transportation and labor had changed little since slavery. This chapter explores how the Mule Train’s representation of poverty

affected perceptions of the campaign, and assesses what the PPC meant for the participants.

Part Three analyzes the rise and fall of Resurrection City and the protests participants staged while residing there. This section considers whether images of the poor in Resurrection City—who were mired in mud throughout their stay—challenged or reinforced negative stereotypes, and how these images encouraged or discouraged the nation from providing assistance. Chapter six explores the creation of this temporary city and the complications organizers faced, as well as their ability to provide participants with three square meals a day, shelter, and a host of social services. While participants received many resources they lacked at home, maintaining the unity displayed on the caravans was difficult once in Washington. As the poor people moved in, much to the dismay and displeasure of SCLC organizers, they immediately began to segregate themselves by race, region, or other tangible markers of identity. Chapter six explores the reasons behind these initial moves to self-segregate and the reactions of the participants to this phenomenon.

On an almost daily basis, PPC participants headed down to a designated government building or to a particular government official's office, or even his home, where activists confronted politicians face to face and asserted their demands. Chapter seven analyzes the ways in which the residents of Resurrection City performed their poverty in stylized protests for both the government and the public. The highlight of the Poor People's Campaign was to be a "Solidarity Day" March on the Washington Mall, scheduled for June 19. Chapter seven explores SCLC leaders' decision to postpone mass arrests until after the march, which approximately 50,000 people attended. This chapter

also analyzes the ever-changing list of demands to assess how many of the movement's stated goals were achieved.

The final chapter considers how occupying the nationally revered, sacred space of the National Mall affected the poor people's attempt to dramatize their claim to be first-class citizens and to have the opportunity to access the vast wealth and resources of the nation. Several recent revisionist civil rights scholars have demonstrated a growing emphasis on the importance of space and place in the development of local civil rights movements, and cultural geographers have begun to address the significance of claiming space and place for social movements. In *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, cultural geographer Don Mitchell explores "those moments when radical activist movements have arisen—again and again—to take back the city and to make it into something better, movements that rethink the exclusions of the past and that struggle to remake the city in a more open and progressive light."⁴⁶ While the PPC did not take back an existing city,⁴⁷ it did claim space that many Americans consider a sacred,⁴⁸ collective space. The monuments decorating the National Mall mark it as a site for celebrating and memorializing the nation's accomplishments.

⁴⁶ See Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 8.

⁴⁷ While the campaign did not remake Washington, D.C., it did disrupt its normal proceedings for the month and a half that the PPC occupied the National Mall.

⁴⁸ Thomas F. Jackson presents the same argument but does not develop it: "Activists came to regret the decision to build the encampment housing several thousand poor people on one of the most sacred of American civic spaces, between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial." See Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 354. While Jackson does a wonderful job of charting King's attempts to lead a crusade for economic justice, he still tells the story of the movement through King, but he does present a more balanced assessment of the PPC than most.

By 1968, most Americans recognized this site as a space all Americans could use, but how the space has been and continues to be used remains highly contested. In *American Sacred Space*, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal define sacred space not necessarily as a religious site, but as “ritual space,” a site for formal, ceremonial rites that represent utopian visions of society.⁴⁹ While some campaign leaders hoped that Resurrection City would serve as a symbol of a model society, most interpreted the purpose of the shantytown as displaying the harsh reality of poverty. The mixture of extreme heat and mud resulting from the torrential rains that plagued the camp throughout its existence ensured that the City would be perceived as the latter concept suggests. But rather than focusing on how the shantytown reflected the problems poor people faced, the media continuously focused on the problems poor people reportedly caused, such as the purported violence and mayhem of Resurrection City. Chapter eight demonstrates how a problematic relationship with the media from the beginning of the campaign contributed to negative press and a lasting impression that the PPC was a failed campaign. Unlike most accounts of the PPC, this study contextualizes the problems in Resurrection City by comparing their issues with those that most cities face, in both the planning and the maintenance of its facilities and inhabitants, and detailing the ways in which the government’s surveillance and infiltration of the campaign affected the protests.

The conclusion analyzes the legacy of the Poor People’s Campaign in relation to other social movements and addresses why this campaign was so significant for its time

⁴⁹ David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, ed., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 10.

and for activists today. The conclusion considers both the immediate effects the campaign produced for participants, as well as their subsequent organizing efforts. Particular attention is given to the emerging American Indian and Chicano movements, as well as more recent attempts to organize an interracial movement of the poor that claim the 1968 Poor People's Campaign as an influence.

Social movement theorists Piven and Cloward argue that if impoverished protesters win at all, they win what "historical circumstances [have] already made ready to be conceded,"⁵⁰ meaning that the overall climate in the nation must be one where the majority of citizens are ready and willing to respond to the demands of the poor. In 1968, the United States was engrossed in an extremely costly and contested war, and most minorities had seen few tangible results from the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Acts. The nation was ill prepared to handle the demands of perhaps the most neglected and most desperate population in the country, despite the Johnson Administration's pledge to declare war on poverty and anti-poverty activists' attempts to respond to the failures of this war. The expense and attention the Vietnam War required was, perhaps, the chief reason for the government, the media, and the public's lack of interest and sympathy for the PPC, but another reason why the movement was either ignored or perceived as a failure was due to its timing.

The PPC occurred in the midst of one of the most tumultuous years, and summers, in recent history. Many believed that a worldwide revolution was about to unfold, while some radicals argued they were already waging it. While the yearlong mobilization and

⁵⁰ Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why they Succeed and How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 36.

six-week camp-in the PPC produced seems remarkable by today's standards, this social movement was one of many dramatic events unfolding during the spring and summer of 1968. In *1968: Marching in the Streets*, Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins argue:

It was a year that marked an entire generation on every continent. Long before 'globalization' became a buzz-word in the culture of free-market politics, the events of 1968 had globalized political radicalism as part of a struggle to change the human condition forever. It was a year of hope, when those who accepted the world as it was were the ones who felt disinherited, while the wretched of the earth, the dispossessed, began to recover their inheritance.⁵¹

In early January as SCLC began mobilizing the nation for their spring campaign, the nation faced growing internal dissent as anti-war activists escalated their protests against the Vietnam War and the government heightened attacks against peace activists.⁵² The month ended with the North Vietnamese's launching of the Tet offensive at Nha Trang, thrusting the United States deeper into an already controversial and costly war. In late March, Czechoslovakia's president Antonin Novotny resigned, sending that struggling nation into chaos and heightening the already tense Cold War climate.

The most widely recognized event in the United States was the assassination of Dr. King on April 4 and the riots that swept the nation in response. The assassination and its after shocks had both immediate and lasting effects on the nation. Just a week after King's death, NYU's University Senate adopted a plan to recruit black faculty and students and establish a Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute to "increase university research

⁵¹ Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins, *1968: Marching in the Streets* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 7.

⁵² "Dr. Benjamin Spock; William Sloan Coffin the chaplain of Yale University; novelist Mitchell Goodman; Michael Ferber, a graduate student at Harvard; and Marcus Raskin a peace activist are indicted on charges of conspiracy to encourage violations of the draft laws by a grand jury in Boston." See *The Whole World Was Watching an oral history of 1968*: <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/reference/timeline.html> (accessed April 8, 2007).

and instruction in subjects dealing with history, culture and current Afro-American affairs."⁵³ Twelve days later, on April 23, Columbia University's chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) kicked off a protest that resulted in the students taking three university administrators hostage and occupying five campus buildings as part of a protest against the university's research for the military and their racist treatment of local Harlem residents. As the PPC's multiracial coalition conducted its lobbying caravan through the capital, the protest at Columbia gained worldwide attention when on April 30, police stormed the building and violently removed the protesting students.

In early May as participants began to board the PPC's nine regional caravans to the capital for the next stage of the PPC, student protests erupted in Paris, launching a month-long protest by the National Labor Unions that paralyzed the city's transportation and communication networks and forced the closing of the Sorbonne. The protest escalated on May 6, known in France as "Bloody Monday," after a riot erupted when thousands of students marched through the Latin Quarter of the city and fought with police. On May 13, as Resurrection City was being built, strikes erupted across France, and by May 22, approximately nine million workers had gone on strike, crippling the nation's production and services.

While violence in France and Prague dominated European headlines, the United States had drama of its own that further distracted the nation's attention away from the PPC. Robert Kennedy's assassination on June 5 paralyzed the nation and the movement. After holding ceremonies to cope with the grief of losing one of the only remaining

⁵³ See NYU timeline: <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/collections/exhibits/arch/1968/1968-4.html> (accessed April 8, 2007).

advocates of the poor, the PPC regrouped, but the mood of the campaign changed after the Kennedy assassination. Many suggested that they had not had sufficient time to grieve in the wake of King's assassination. Kennedy's death forced PPC leaders and participants to take stock and face the grim reality that few remaining leaders supported their cause. As the Resurrection City stage of the PPC came to a close in late June, the nation's attention turned to the upcoming presidential campaign and the Democratic and Republican conventions. The protests at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago in late August appear in most histories of the era, while the much longer and equally dramatic PPC is often absent from accounts of this period. Another dramatic protest occurred in early September when Women's Liberation groups and members of New York's chapter of NOW protested the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, protesting the pageant's exploitation of women as sexual objects.

Protests continued into the fall but met increased resistance. In late August, the Soviet Union invaded Prague, putting an end to the protests of "Prague Spring." On October 2, police and military forces in Mexico City violently attacked protesting students, killing or injuring hundreds. The Summer Olympics, which were located in the troubled city, provided black power activist athletes with a stage on which to perform their politics for the world to see. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gold and silver medalists in the 200-meter dash, protested the racial discrimination within universities and athletic programs in the U.S. by performing the black power salute during the "Star-Spangled Banner" at their medal ceremony.

While the election of Richard Nixon in November signaled increasing restraints on activism as the public embraced the new president's rhetoric of "law and order,"

protests continued. Shortly after the election, on November 14, anti-war protestors rallied on National Turn in Your Draft Card Day. The tumultuous year ended with the U.S.'s first mission to circle the moon, as the Apollo 8 launched on December 21, 1968. Despite a report on December 11 that indicated that the unemployment rate was the lowest it had been in fifteen years, at 3.3%,⁵⁴ the minority poor continued to feel the effects of widespread joblessness and to face the challenge of surviving on inadequate wages. The PPC, the largest and longest multiracial anti-poverty protest of the era, captured the nation's attention while it was going on, but it has failed to grab the attention of the media or scholars as a historically significant movement, in part, because it occurred during perhaps the most volatile year in recent American history.

This dissertation seeks to expose how memorializing functions as a political act. While most Americans touted the astronauts' trip to the moon as one of the nation's proudest moments, black poet/musician/activist Gil Scott-Heron presents the perspective of many of the nation's poor in his 1970 song "Whitey on the Moon":

"No hot water, no toilets, no lights. (but Whitey's on the moon) . . . How come there ain't no money here? (Hmm! Whitey's on the moon) Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill (of Whitey on the moon) I think I'll sen' these doctor bills, Airmail special (to Whitey on the moon)."⁵⁵

While this response from one of the godfathers of hip hop reached his listeners, it is doubtful that many elected officials and government administrators were listening to Gil Scott Heron.

⁵⁴ The Whole World Was Watching an oral history of 1968: <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/reference/timeline.html> (accessed April 8, 2007).

⁵⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, "White on the Moon," *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (1970); Lyrics cited from <http://www.gilscottheron.com/lywhitey.html> (accessed April 8, 2007).

“Civil Rights’ ‘Unfinished Business’” demonstrates the ways in which the PPC exposed poverty, provided participants with access to their government, gave poor people agency through daily protests, and transformed participants’ lives. Above all, this multi-racial anti-poverty movement challenged popular perceptions of the poor as lazy, apathetic, and trapped in a cycle of poverty. The following chapter explores how Americans defined poverty, how social scientists have constructed the poor as deviant and even pathological, and how the gap between poverty discourse and the experience of poverty has led to ineffective public policy and has prompted activists simultaneously to protest economic and racial oppression.

PART ONE

Poverty Discourse, Poverty Policy, & Poverty Protests: The Roots of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign

“Because the language of poverty is a vocabulary of invidious distinction, poverty discourse highlights the social construction of difference . . . For reasons of convenience, power, or moral judgment, we select from among a myriad of traits and then sort people, objects, and situations into categories which we then treat as real . . . this process of reification defines the line between normality and deviance, ignores the perspective of the powerless, and accepts existing social and economic arrangements as natural.”¹

—Michael B. Katz

“While ideas about gender and even race have moved, however haltingly, in the direction of greater tolerance and inclusivity, ideas about class remain mired in prejudice and mythology. Enlightened people who might flinch at a racial slur have no trouble listing the character defects of an ill-defined ‘underclass,’ defects which routinely include ignorance, promiscuity, and sloth.”²

—Barbara Ehrenreich

What is poverty? Who are the poor? What separates the poor from the rest of us?

Why does poverty persist among prosperity? These are questions that Americans have grappled with throughout their history. Poverty is a slippery concept that floats among other, equally tricky concepts, like race, class, gender, and culture—all of which are socially constructed, dynamic, historically specific categories. In *Cycles of Outrage*, historian James Gilbert identifies a similar problem with understanding delinquency and the cycles of indignation that occurred as Americans discovered and rediscovered juvenile misbehavior. He defines this phenomenon as an “episodic notion,” “broadly held ideas” that “present themselves as puzzles” and thus “require a degree of decoding to grasp their larger implications; they must be constantly redefined in terms of context,

¹ Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 5-6.

² Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 7.

intent, and reference.”³ Poverty is another example of an “episodic notion,” a social problem that is always present but is “rediscovered” during times of great socioeconomic, cultural, and political flux, and its definition, causes, and effects continue to be debated.

DEFINING POVERTY: POVERTY IS BEING POOR

As countless poverty documents declare, poverty is “the natural condition of man.” Only a handful of countries in the Northern hemisphere are affluent, while the majority of the world is poor. Yet in an age of technology, mobility, and unprecedented wealth, poverty is the result of socioeconomic and political forces, not natural conditions.

As Thomas Gladwin suggested in 1967 in his influential book *Poverty U.S.A.*,

Being poor has a large number of secondary consequences such as powerlessness, inadequate access to resources, lack of education, and a poor diet. However, these follow and are derived from a primary condition of just being poor. Being poor, at least in the United States, consists in a lack of sufficient money to function effectively in the economic system through which everyone is forced to seek the necessities of life.⁴

While proponents of the culture of poverty theory have located the cause for poverty in poor people’s behavior, all of the pejorative characteristics attributed to poor people are in some form or fashion the result of not having enough money to get by in a capitalist society. Many people charge the poor with being too present-minded, but small and insufficient income makes planning ahead and budgeting virtually impossible, resulting in a life of small deals and purchases.⁵ The poor are maligned for their deteriorated health, dilapidated housing, tattered clothing, dirty appearance, putrid smell, dependence,

³ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4-5.

⁴ Thomas Gladwin, *Poverty U.S.A.* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1967), 48.

⁵ Louise G. Richards, “Consumer Practices of the Poor,” in *Low Income Life Styles*, ed. Lola M. Irelan (Washington, D.C.: Welfare Administration, 1966), 67-86.

and hopelessness. But as former welfare mother Jo Goodwin Parker explains, many of these characteristics are the result of a lack of money, and some are simply untrue:

Even the poor can dream. A dream of a time when there is money. Money for the right kinds of food, for worm medicine, for iron pills, for toothbrushes, for hand cream, for a hammer and nails and a bit of screening, for a shovel, for a bit of paint, for some sheeting, for needles and thread. Money to pay in money for a trip to town. And, oh, money for hot water and money for soap. A dream of when asking for help does not eat away the last bit of pride.⁶

Parker reveals that these characteristics are not inherent in particular groups; they reflect the effects of poverty rather than its causes.

Defining poverty as a lack of capital allows for individuals and groups to move in and out of poverty, recognizing it as a fluid, historically specific and socially constructed category. Working-class and middle-class identities are largely based on one's form of occupation and one's material wealth, but poverty is defined in the negative, as an absence of these qualities. While the reality of being poor is rooted in a lack of capital, the stereotypes of poor people demonstrate that poverty is much more than an economic condition. Being poor is an identity. And in a nation that places a premium on financial wealth, it is an identity that few desire. Yet up until the last four decades, poverty was so widespread that it was difficult to distinguish between the permanent poor—the unemployables—and those who moved in and out of the workforce, the working poor. Barbara Cruikshank argues that the government's War on Poverty actually transformed those in poverty from a disparate group often in conflict with one another into "the

⁶ Jo Goodwin Parker, "What is Poverty?" in *America's Other Children: Public Schools Outside Suburbia*, ed. George Henderson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), reprinted in *75 Readings Plus*, Santi V. Buscemi and Charlotte Smith, ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), 126-130, 129.

poor”—a multiracial, regionally diverse political interest group.⁷ During this era poor people joined forces to protest their condition and the government’s failure to help them and at the same time fostered a sense of pride and dignity in being poor. Part One explores the poor people’s movements of the 1950s and 1960s that paved the way for the Poor People’s Campaign. While social scientists, government officials, and journalists were studying or “discovering” the poor and debating the causes of and solutions for poverty, poor people were combating vicious stereotypes through dramatic protests.

POVERTY DISCOURSE: POVERTY IS BEING DESPISED

Several themes reappear throughout the history of U.S. poverty discourse, but the most pervasive and unremitting argument is that poor people, and in particular poor people of color, are undeserving and untrustworthy. Interviewed for John Langston Gwaltney’s classic *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*, Othman Sullivan declares, “I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger.”⁸ Over twenty years later in *Yo Mama’s Dysfunctional*, historian Robin D.G. Kelley comments on Sullivan’s quip while reflecting back on his astonishment when he first read journalists, academics, and politicians in college who he felt took stereotyping black people to a whole different level. One of the most persistent and offensive attacks emerged from the release of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which labeled the black female-headed household “pathological” and rooted its existence in patterns developed during slavery. Kelley insists that the Moynihan Report is “like the

⁷ Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 86.

⁸ John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980): xix.

one about your mama tying a mattress to her back and offering ‘roadside service,’” explaining that “Moynihan’s ‘snap’” is worse than most because it “has been repeated by legions of analysts and politicians.” Kelley suggests that the label of “dysfunctional” results from a combination of both fear and envy of black behavior, and the conflation of behavior with culture.⁹

Yet blacks were not the only group to recognize these damaging social science-inspired stereotypes. In 1970, in *We Talk You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf*, Vine Deloria, Jr. outlined his representation of American Indians’ relations with other groups within the U.S. and declared that American Indians had been made the “Other” among others. He recounted, “I have yet to attend a conference on poverty, race relations, social problems, civil rights, or pollution without being tagged an ‘other,’” and decried the tendency in the U.S. to cast all social issues in terms of a black/white binary. Like Kelley, Deloria criticized the ways social scientists have tried to explain their cultures and behaviors. Condemning an anthropologist who argued that Indians drank alcohol to help gain an identity, Deloria retorted, “If we acted the way anthropologists describe us, we would get lousy stinking drunk, THEN DECIDE WHAT TRIBE WE WANTED TO BELONG TO, and finally choose a surname for ourselves.”¹⁰

Writing during the early years of the Chicano Movement, Chicano scholar Octavio Ignacio Romano V argued that academics had characterized Mexican Americans

⁹ Kelley makes reference to this quote in his discussion of social scientists construction of blackness in *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional*, 2.

¹⁰ Vine Deloria, Jr., *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 85, 11.

as an a-historic people, never as active participants and shapers of their history.¹¹ That same year Salvador Alvarez provided a list of the various pejorative labels applied to Mexican Americans and analyzed the social scientists' perpetuation of these stereotypes from 1912-1968.¹²

Even poor whites have not escaped pejorative labels. Writing during the late 1970s, J. Wayne Flynt in *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites*, declared that social scientists frequently have characterized poor whites as “degenerate racists, white trash commonly guilty of incest and mindless violence . . . a clannish, primitive and illiterate people lacking any worthy cultural productions.”¹³ In more recent years whiteness studies scholars have recognized the ways in which both individuals and the media have cast poor whites in racialized terms like “redneck” and “cracker.”¹⁴

While racial stereotypes vary among different groups, social scientists and policy makers have cast all of the poor as deviant and pathological. These persistent ideas about the poor do not merely exist; they exist because they serve useful purposes—they provide a scapegoat for frustration and fear in an uncertain economy, they link virtue and success to legitimate a capitalist system that remains victim to market whims, they ameliorate

¹¹ Octavio Ignacio Romano V., “The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican-Americans: The Distortion of Mexican-American History,” *Voices: Readings from El Grito, A Journal of Contemporary Mexican American Thought, 1967-1973* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, Inc., 1971), 43-44.

¹² Salvador Alvarez, “Mexican American Community Organizations” *Voices: Readings from El Grito, A Journal of Contemporary Mexican American Thought, 1967-1973* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, Inc., 1971), 205.

¹³ J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 1.

¹⁴ See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and John Hartigan, *Odd Tribes: A Cultural Analysis of White People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

middle-class Judeo-Christian guilt of the presence of poverty amid plenty, and they thwart the unification of poor people, preventing the rise of a strong proletarian political force.¹⁵

Poverty scholars offer various explanations for the overwhelmingly pejorative nature of U.S. poverty discourse. Neo-Marxist poverty activists and scholars Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, writing in the early 1970s, argued that in a capitalist culture where success equals wealth, moral condemnation of the poor detracts attention from the exploitative relations that create poverty.¹⁶ In the *Undeserving Poor*, published nearly twenty years later, historian Michael Katz demonstrates how during transformative periods during the nation's development, policy makers and social scientists have constructed the poor as "Other" through binaries—neighbor versus stranger, poor versus pauper, deserving versus undeserving. By casting groups deemed unworthy of assistance in racial and gendered terms, these individuals dismiss the political and ideological forces at work in creating these distinctions. Katz insists that U.S. poverty discourse locates the roots of poverty in family, race, and culture rather than in the structure of the system itself, causing poverty to be seen as a behavioral choice rather than the result of inequality and exploitation.¹⁷ He argues:

Mainstream discourse about poverty, whether liberal or conservative, largely stays silent about politics, power, and equality. But poverty, after all, is about distribution; it results because some people receive a great deal less than others.

¹⁵ Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989): 10. See also Neil Betten, "American Attitudes Toward the Poor: A Historical Overview," *Current History*, Vol. 65, No. 383 (July 1973): 1.

¹⁶ See Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: the Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

¹⁷ Katz, 8.

Descriptions of the demography, behavior, or beliefs of subpopulations cannot explain the patterned inequalities evident in every era of American history. These result from styles of dominance, the way power is exercised, and the politics of distribution.¹⁸

In *Poverty Knowledge*, historian Alice O'Connor demonstrates how social scientists obscured the political nature of inequality by individualizing poverty rather than recognizing its structural roots. She argues that the theories social scientists produced from the nineteenth century through the early twentieth century served as

... a form of cultural affirmation: a powerful reassurance that poverty occurs outside or in spite of core American values and practices, whether those are defined in terms of capitalist markets, political democracy, self-reliance, and/or a two parent, white, middle-class family ideal.¹⁹

During the prosperous 1960s, being poor increasingly became seen as an anomaly to many Americans who were unaware that poverty existed throughout the nation.

At the same time, social scientists and the media popularized the culture of poverty theory, which blamed poor people and their perceived lack of values for the persistence of poverty. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis first introduced the concept in his ethnographic studies of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans published during the 1960s. He hypothesized that a small percentage of the poor were stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty that represented a series of adaptations to their condition and environment. Lewis presented an extensive list of characteristics to describe those trapped in a culture of poverty, which included general traits, such as lack of participation and integration in and extreme hostility and suspicion toward society's major institutions, apathy, the absence of

¹⁸ Katz, 5-6.

¹⁹ Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15.

childhood, a high level of abandonment, and feelings of helplessness, dependence, and inferiority.²⁰

While Lewis stressed the distinction between general poverty and the culture of poverty, assessing that in the U.S. only 20% of the poor were trapped within this cycle, journalists like Michael Harrington, social scientists, and policy makers applied his culture of poverty concept to all of the U.S. poor. Through this designation writers and scholars estranged the poor from the rest of the society, making them the nation's "Other."²¹ Alice O'Connor argues that by the late 1960s, characterizations of the poor as deviant had replaced biology as the basis for racism, and poverty increasingly became seen "as an alternative to rather than as a dimension of racial inequality."²² While the culture of poverty theory might provide the modern day basis for racism, it is clearly not an alternative to racism but a dimension of it when even poor whites have been racialized due to their poverty. The PPC's multiracial coalition illustrated that poverty was largely a *result* of racial discrimination and the economic exploitation of people of color and their labor. The culture of poverty theory and the racial and gendered stereotypes of the poor

²⁰ See Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez* (New York: Random House, 1961). In 1966 Lewis presented a list of more pejorative behavioral characteristics in his study of Puerto Rican families *La Vida*, which included "a high incidence of maternal deprivation, of orality, of weak ego structure, confusion of sexual identification, a lack of impulse control, a strong present-time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism, a widespread belief in male superiority and a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts." See *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966), vii.

²¹ Oscar Lewis, Michael Harrington, and a host of other liberal social scientists and journalists unintentionally provided conservatives with the tools to further malign the poor. And while Lewis's recommendations for eradicating poverty were quite radical, stressing that the only way to eliminate the culture of poverty was to organize the poor, using the civil rights movement and Third World revolutions as successful examples, Harrington labeled the poor as passive while calling on middle-class liberals like himself to act on their behalf. See Katz, 18.

²² O'Connor, 17.

are not only hurtful, they have also weakened the poor's chances of receiving adequate government assistance in meeting their basic needs.

Conservatives, as well as some liberals, have used the culture of poverty theory to argue that certain groups remain in a state of poverty because their actions are incompatible with economic success and to suggest that federal relief programs would do little to help the cyclical poor. In *Subordinating the Poor*, Joe R. Feagin insists that this individualist ideology has not only demonized the poor but has also maligned the relief programs formed to help them, particularly welfare.²³ Modern conservatives replicate the age-old anti-welfare argument that began almost two hundred years earlier with economist Thomas Malthus, which poverty scholar Albert O. Hirschman has termed “the perversity thesis.” This argument combines Christian morality and classical liberal economic theory to suggest that rather than a kind and charitable act, relief of any kind disrupts the natural social order and corrupts those receiving aid, making them lazy and irresponsible.²⁴ The persistence of the perversity theory has resulted in the predominant view of poor people as undeserving of aid and incompetent to handle any money given directly to them.

Contemporary poverty discourse has remained consistent with the past in its conceptions of both poverty and the poor, and the U.S. has continued to fall behind other

²³ Joe R. Feagin, *Subordinating the Poor: Welfare and American Beliefs* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), 126 (based on 1969 national survey).

²⁴ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 23, 27-42. See Thomas Malthus, *Essays on the Principles of Population* (London: Penguin Books, 1st ed. 1798. reprinted, 1985) for the original presentation of this theory. See Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) for the most popular contemporary example of the culture of poverty theory in practice.

nations in relief efforts. Michael Katz explains that empirical evidence has rarely shaped policy because poverty discourse typically has had

. . . only a tenuous relation to the origins and demographics of poverty and the results of public policy. How we think and speak about poverty and what we do (or don't do) about it emerges as much from a mix of ideology and politics as from the structure of the problem itself.²⁵

This disconnect has led to relief and reform efforts that treat symptoms rather than root causes of poverty, largely because the public believed aid would only perpetuate poverty. The history of U.S. poverty and poverty policy reveals that there is a persistent denigration of relief, particularly welfare, and an incessant elevation of self-help, and few alternatives to these two solutions.²⁶

Part one explores the popularization of the culture of poverty theory, activists' attempts to counter damaging representations of the poor and protest ineffective public policy, and the solutions poor people and their advocates developed for eradicating poverty. Through its analysis of anti-poverty campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s in chapter one and its exploration of the birth of the PPC in chapter two, part one demonstrates that poor people have consistently belied characterizations of them as lazy and apathetic, and that activists fighting racial discrimination consistently have attacked the economic exploitation that results from racism.

²⁵ Katz, 5.

²⁶ Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 8.

CHAPTER ONE

Dual and Dueling Agendas: 1960s Poverty Discourse, Poverty Policy, & Anti-poverty Protests

“There's nothing new about poverty. What is new is we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will.”¹

-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and equality as a result.”²

-President Lyndon B. Johnson

On August 28, 1963, an interracial, multi-faith coalition of approximately 250,000 people participated in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the most celebrated event of the civil rights era.³ As the event's primary organizer Bayard Rustin recounts, “The people voted that day with their feet. They came from every state, they came in jalopies, on trains, on buses, anything they could get—some walked.”⁴ A group from the Brooklyn, New York chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) made the 237-mile trip on foot; eighty-two-year-old Jay Hardon rode his bicycle from Dayton, Ohio; and Ledger Smith roller-skated the 750 miles from Chicago, wearing a bright red

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., “The Promised Land 1967-1968,” *Eyes on the Prize II Part 4* (Alexandria, VA: Blackside Productions, 1990).

² “Remarks of the President at Howard University, June 4, 1965,” reprinted in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, ed., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1967), 126.

³ Those who teach civil rights hear a common refrain from their students when asked on the first day of class what they know about the civil rights movement. It generally goes something like this: Rosa Parks sat down, Dr. King stood up and gave his “I Have a Dream Speech,” and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were passed, bringing an end to the civil rights movement. My own students' interviews with seniors from the East Austin community revealed similar perspectives on the movement.

⁴ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, ed., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 169.

sash that read Freedom.⁵ Typically remembered for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and the peaceful nature of the demonstration, few have recognized that the 1963 March was a poor people's movement. *The New York Times* reported that for one participant, Mrs. Hazel Mangle Rivers from Alabama, "the \$8 bus ticket represented more than one-tenth of her husband's weekly salary" to participate in the one-day march.⁶

The sacrifices poor people made to participate in the 1963 March on Washington and in the 1968 Poor People's Campaign challenge representations of poor people as lazy and apathetic. While the media have ignored the similarities between these two movements, both of which protested economic and racial oppression, they have been remembered in very different ways. The media have both celebrated and sanitized the 1963 March on Washington, while the press and scholars have either ignored the PPC or deemed it a failure. Many popular portrayals of the '63 march have ignored the conflicts that transpired behind-the-scenes, the speeches that were censored, and the radical economic basis of the demonstration, which demanded both jobs and freedom. Five years later the press touted the '63 march as one of the nation's most celebrated moments, while chastising the press touted the earlier march as one of the nation's most celebrated moments, while chastising the PPC's comparable Solidarity Day march, which 50,000 people attended, for lacking the spirit of the former. In 1968, the media deemed the PPC a failed, chaotic movement, while glorifying the picnic-like atmosphere, interracial display of unity, and only the most idealistic portions of King's speech.

⁵ Patrick Henry Bass, *Like a Mighty Stream: The March on Washington, August 28, 1963* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2002), 21.

⁶ "Marcher from Alabama, Mrs. Hazel Mangle Rivers," *The New York Times*, August 29, 1963.

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was an important predecessor to the PPC. The political transformations that occurred between these two marches contributed to the negative reception of the later movement. The PPC looked different. By 1968, protesters were not wearing their Sunday best, and people were not hopeful—they were angry. This chapter explores the campaigns of the early 1960s that struggled to negotiate competing demands as they pursued a dual agenda, fighting for both racial and economic rights. Chapter one argues that rather than a radical break with the traditional civil rights movement, the PPC was an organic outgrowth of activists' heightened attention to economic rights after securing legislation that promised to enforce desegregation. Indeed, the PPC built upon a vibrant foundation of activism dedicated to demanding economic equality. Mobilizing people, organizing local, grassroots movements, and forming coalitions was difficult work, and dual agendas often became dueling agendas as activists competed for resources and media exposure.

In order to contextualize the movement's perceived failure in comparison with other anti-poverty campaigns of the era, this chapter considers the immediate historical milieu out of which the Poor People's Campaign emerged. The rhetoric of economic rights civil rights that activists touted eventually prompted an ambitious new president to declare war on poverty. The dueling agendas of Johnson's various advisers exposed and popularized the dominant trends in poverty discourse and shaped the War on Poverty programs. In the wake of urban rebellions of the mid-1960s, the image of poverty transformed from white, rural, and male to black, urban, and female as welfare programs and anti-poverty campaigns became increasingly associated with this population in particular, and blacks in general. This transformation coincided with the release and

popularization of the Moynihan Report and the emergence of the burgeoning welfare rights movement that organized the same single, black welfare mothers Moynihan deemed pathological. While activists advocated for a dual agenda, some protested gender biases while others replicated them. Chapter one illustrates how female activists resisted gender discrimination and pursued a triple agenda against the interconnected threats of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. But before exploring the movements of the era, this chapter recounts the “discovery” of poverty amid affluence during the late 1950s and early 1960s and details the economic conditions poor people endured and protested.

DISCOVERING POVERTY: EXPOSING THE “OTHER” AMERICA AMID AFFLUENCE

The post-World War II discovery of poverty was much like the discovery of America, as Barbara Ehrenreich quipped, “plenty of people were on the site before the discoverers arrived,” and the fact that they had to be found in the first place said more about the discoverers and “the delusions that guided their discoveries” than about the poor they found.⁷ Ehrenreich suggests that while black activists were protesting both racial discrimination and the poverty it produced, a small cadre of middle-class white male academics and policy makers’ discovery of a “new poverty” resistant to post-war affluence gave middle-class liberalism “the grit and definition it had been seeking.”⁸ The Old Left, with its focus on working-class unions and New Deal liberalism, seemed tired and undemanding; the New Left needed something to reinvigorate it, and poverty was it, yet they would have to explore affluence before discovering poverty.

⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

In 1954, American historian David Potter argued that American prosperity was the basis of national character.⁹ But by the decade's end some cultural critics and social scientists began to argue that affluence had deleterious effects, one of which was the neglect of the "Other America," the hidden poor still suffering despite national prosperity. The popular emphasis on affluence enabled Americans to discuss wealth without acknowledging the class inequities in a booming consumer society, while mass-produced clothing purchased from burgeoning suburban shopping centers further hid the poor and promoted the fallacy of a classless society.¹⁰

In the late 1950s, the overall poverty rate in the United States was 22%, meaning that approximately 39.5 million people were living in poverty,¹¹ but the majority of the poor were out of sight, and therefore out of mind. Despite such large numbers of poor people, Robert Bremner, writing amid the post-war prosperity about the initial "discovery" of poverty during the early nineteenth century, reported that most Americans viewed post-World War II poverty as an aberration that could cure itself.¹² Most knew almost nothing about the poor, and some doubted their existence.¹³ Social scientists had little more insight than the public as poverty knowledge became scattered during 1940s and early 1950s with Cold War social scientists focused on defense and foreign policy rather than domestic problems. Many believed the strong economy or behavior

⁹ David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

¹⁰ Ehrenreich, 30.

¹¹ See United States Department of Health and Human Services website: <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/98gb/apenh.html> (accessed July 20, 2006).

¹² Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), xi.

¹³ Robert L. Helbroner, "Who Are the American Poor?" *Harper's*, June 1950.

modification among the poor would solve social problems, resulting in a preference for prevention rather than relief programs.¹⁴

In 1958, economist John Kenneth Galbraith published *The Affluent Society*, which argued that affluence harmed both the rich and the poor by neglecting the “new poverty” that persisted despite prosperity.¹⁵ Poverty was a general condition throughout most of U.S. history, but Galbraith identified two categories of poverty that remained amid post-war prosperity: “insular poverty” of the rural South and Appalachia and “case poverty” which included the mentally and physically ill, as well as those Galbraith described as having an “inability to adapt to the discipline of modern economic life, excessive procreation, alcohol insufficient education.”¹⁶ Galbraith’s structural analysis challenged the predominant individual and behavioral view of poverty, but affluence was often assumed to be the focus of the book since many never made it past the title.

¹⁴ James Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty, 1900-1980*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 78; Bremner, 266-267.

¹⁵ The discovery of poverty is generally attributed to journalists and social scientists writing during the early 1960s, but poverty historian Jennifer Mittelstadt demonstrates that the initial rediscovery of poverty occurred during the mid-1950s within the ranks of a small group affiliated with the less exalted fields of social work and welfare administration. Mittelstadt argues that Wilbur Cohen, “one of the most influential social policy experts in postwar America,” spearheaded the rediscovery of poverty. Former Social Security Administration analyst, professor of public administration at University of Michigan’s School of Social Work, and later secretary of HEW under LBJ, Cohen initiated several poverty studies during the mid-1950s and shared his ideas with countless policy makers, relief workers, and academics. Several other developments furthered the rediscovery of poverty. In 1955, Democratic congressman John Sparkman of Alabama convened hearings to assess the size and characteristics of the poor. Two years later, Democratic governor Averell Harriman and his deputy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, conducted a similar study in New York. In 1957 an elite Washington economic policy think tank, the Committee for Economic Development, produced a comprehensive study on poverty, and during the same year the Russell Sage Foundation provided a large, multiyear grant to University of Michigan for poverty studies. Yet none of these studies had much of an effect on the nation as a whole. See Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945-1965* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 1-6.

While Galbraith shaped the popular consciousness, Secretary of HEW Wilbur Cohen and his cohort of social workers and welfare administrators formed political coalitions with leftist organizations, such as the AFL-CIO's Community Service Activities division, and the National Urban League (NUL) to lobby for improvements in existing welfare programs. In addition, a growing number of foundations, such as the newly formed Field Foundation, provided a crucial source of financial support for further research and public relations. All of these efforts were made in an attempt to explain the paradox of poverty within prosperity. Most argued, like Galbraith, that a new kind of "fundamental poverty," unlike the "situational poverty" of the temporary unemployed, persisted because of a vicious cycle caused by lack of education, medical problems, and low level of skills or ability to work. But above all, single-mother households became their main focus.¹⁷

The Cold War turned the nation's attention and budget towards defense rather than welfare, and during the 1950s poverty discourse became increasingly conservative. Most Americans still believed that state-sponsored poverty programs reflected signs of social decay.¹⁸ The image of the white male hobo of the 1930s quickly gave way to that of single mothers, who stood out as the most visible poor due to their association with the most despised government program, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). This federally funded program provided 3.1 million poor people with relief during the mid-1950s, nearly 90% of whom lived in single-female headed households. The 1956 Social Security

¹⁶ John K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

¹⁷ Mittlestadt, 6.

Amendments made ADC's focus rehabilitation, but debate raged over whether single mothers should enter the workforce and be self-sufficient or stay home and raise children while receiving aid. Policy makers had a stranglehold on almost all decisions regarding poverty, and as a result, in the South and West local welfare agencies made racial distinctions between poor mothers, often forcing minority women to work while white women were made eligible for welfare. To justify the need for rehabilitation, policy makers stigmatized poor single-mothers for their deviations from the nuclear family, which raised anxieties about family, race, and gender.¹⁹

DEFINING & DEBATING POVERTY

As black activists pursued the dual agenda throughout the impoverished South, social scientists and policy makers' interest in poverty increased across the nation. With heightened attention to the problem, funding for poverty studies expanded, and assessments of the extent of poverty and the rate at which it affected different groups were determined. A central reason for the countless poverty studies that emerged during the 1960s was the increased availability of quantitative data. For the first time in U.S. history, the 1960 Census provided detailed statistics on U.S. poverty, as well as data on the different groups that made up the poor, displaying significant trends according to age, sex, race, region, family structure, occupation, and physical ability. As historian Walter I. Trattner argues, the census "provided scholars and writers with the raw material to factually discover or rediscover what the civil rights movement and the rise in relief roles

¹⁸ Bremner, 267. See also F. Emerson Andrews, "We Are in a New Era of Giving," *New York Times Magazine*, December 10, 1950; Jacob Panken, "I Say Relief is Ruining Families," *Saturday Evening Post* September, 30 1950, 25.

¹⁹ Mittelstadt, 3-14.

already were beginning to indicate.”²⁰ The definition of poverty also became more concrete in the early 1960s as the government adopted a single system to calculate the poverty line. Molly Orshanky of the Social Security Administration developed poverty thresholds based on the Department of Agriculture’s “economy” food budget, which she multiplied by three for a minimum subsistence level for a family of four. In 1960 the poverty line was estimated at \$3,000, which statistics reveal approximately thirty-five million people fell below.²¹

While both the census and the new poverty line reflected an overall reduction in poverty, historian James Patterson demonstrates the relative and dynamic nature of poverty, arguing that it was actually easier to be poor during the Great Depression than in the prosperous 1960s. While over half of the poor lived on farms and grew their own food in the 1930s, by the 1960s 85% lived in cities, where nothing could be prepared without money. In addition, 1930s Americans did not expect the luxuries of modern technologies, with 58% lacking central heat and 40% lacking bathtubs as late as 1940. By the 1960s, electricity, cars, and televisions sets, which constantly reminded the poor of the luxuries others enjoyed, all became seen as necessities.²² While relative definitions of poverty help explain the outrage of the poor in a rich nation obsessed with consumerism and technology, the demographics of poverty in 1960 help illustrate why the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign and other anti-poverty movements were necessary.

²⁰ Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1999, 6th edition), 318.

²¹ Patterson, 81.

²² *Ibid.*, 42.

A brief glimpse of total poverty statistics reveals some of the larger trends that social scientists and policy makers tried to combat throughout the 1960s. In 1960 more than thirty-five million lived below the \$3,000 poverty line, while over seventy-seven million lived in deprivation, with ten and a half million multiple-person families with annual incomes under \$4000, and almost four million single people with annual incomes under \$2000. High economic growth from World War II to 1953 signaled progressive trends in income distribution, but with the slow economic growth from 1953-60, distribution of income became increasingly unequal. The total shares of personal income declined for the lowest, second lowest, and third lowest consumer groups, while the income shares of the two highest groups steadily raised. Of the total number of poor in 1960, 57% had household heads with less than eight years education, 30.7% were in female-headed households, 27.6% had unemployed household heads, and 23.3% had heads over sixty-five-years-old. While education was one of the biggest problems, and the percentages of unemployed and aged household heads were high, poverty discourse obsessed over the female-headed households.²³

Poverty also became increasingly geographically diverse, and poor people from different ethnoracial groups began to have more in common with those living in the same regions. The 1960 Census clearly revealed that people from all ethno-racial backgrounds living in rural areas suffered disproportionately from poverty.²⁴ Other total poverty

²³ Conference on Economic Progress, *Poverty and Deprivation in the United States: The Plight of Two-Fifths Of a Nation* (Washington, D.C., April 1962), 4, 61. See also U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1964) for poverty statistics.

²⁴ In all regions, metropolitan areas with populations over one million had the lowest levels of poverty, while urban areas with populations under 250,000 demonstrated a moderate increase in

statistics revealed racial and geographical demographics, reporting that almost half of the poor, 43.3%, lived in the South, 21.6% were nonwhite, and 16.9% lived on farms.²⁵ More than 60% of nonwhite families lived in poverty in 1960 compared to 28% of white families, with almost 32% of nonwhites making under \$2,000 annually, contrasted with only 11% of whites, and almost 13.5% of nonwhites making under \$1,000 compared to 4% of whites.²⁶ The census statistics blurred distinctions among the different ethnoracial groups that participated in the PPC by lumping them into one category—nonwhite.

The image of the poor that has predominated since the 1960s is that of the poor, black, urban, single mother, who made up a disproportionate percentage of the poor, but in 1960 able-bodied white males who worked full time headed a fifth of poor families.²⁷

While many poor whites moved out of poverty and into the middle class during the 1960s, Appalachian poverty increased as thousands were left destitute with the collapse of farming, mining, and lumber, the only industries in the region. Many continued to leave the region, joining those highlanders who had already migrated, as well as ever-increasing numbers of blacks, and Latinos in the overcrowded, racially tense urban

poverty. Approximately fifteen million of the thirty-five million falling below the poverty line lived in rural areas, defined as towns and villages with populations under 2,500, with over five million of the rural population living on farms. The 1960 Census reported the national median family income at \$5,660; while urban families made an average of \$6,166, rural non-farm families made only \$4,750, and farm families made only \$3,228. Conditions for farmers deteriorated rapidly, and by 1963, 43% of farm families lived in poverty, over half in the South, compared to only 17% of the forty-four million non-farm families. See Richard L Morril and Ernest H. Wohlenberg, *The Geography of Poverty in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 37; Buis T. Inman, "Panorama of Rural Poverty," *Rural Poverty: Cause, Extent, Location, and Trends* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1964): 1-6, reprinted in *Poverty and Affluence*, 98-102); see also Patterson, 81.

²⁵ See 1960 U.S. Census.

²⁶ Conference on Economic Progress, *Poverty and Deprivation in the United States: The Plight of Two-Fifths Of a Nation* (Washington, D.C., April 1962), 61.

²⁷ Patterson, 81.

centers, primarily in the Midwest.²⁸ While the poorest of the poor were the 378,000 rural American Indians—72% of the total Indian population—the census statistics reveal the disproportionate number of people of color living in poverty.²⁹ Along with farm families, migrant laborers suffered from poverty more than most.³⁰

As Chicano historians Martinez and Lopez y Rivas explain, the 1960 Census used veiled language to describe and quantify the extent of disorder in southwestern barrios:

One is ‘overpopulated’; 34% of Mexican families and 21% of ‘non-whites’ lived in “overpopulated” homes in 1960, while only 7.7% of Anglo families lived in such dwellings. The category “ramshackle or run-down housing units’ included 9

²⁸ While whites made the majority of the poor population, the census, which divided population statistics into white and nonwhite, revealed the extent to which minority groups suffered disproportionately. Like poverty as a whole, nonwhite poverty was geographically diverse, with 25 to 30% in the urban Northeast and Pacific West compared to a whopping 65% to 80% in the South, with the most extreme poverty, 83%, in Mississippi. Few Latinos and American Indians resided in the South at this time, while blacks were most heavily concentrated in the Coastal Plains from Virginia to Texas and in the Mississippi Delta, the poorest region in the nation. See 1960 U.S. Census; and Morrill and Wohlenberg, *The Geography of Poverty*, 36-37.

²⁹ Patterson, 99-100.

³⁰ Today, when the media and politicians speak of migrant labor they often are referring Mexican immigrants, both legal and illegal. But in 1960 the Department of Agriculture estimated almost 500,000 domestic migrant workers laboring alongside some 450,000 foreign workers, primarily from Mexico. Three major migrant streams existed in the U.S., the largest stretching through the mid-continent from South Texas up to Canada, with about 250,000 migrant workers traveling its path. The other two major streams flow up and down the East and West Coasts, with approximately 100,000 migrants working each area in 1960. See Lenore Epstein, “Migratory Farm Workers,” From “Unmet Need in a Land of Abundance,” *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (May, 1963): 10-11. For a detailed history of the eastern seaboard stream and its biracial workforce, see Jacqueline Jones’ *The Dispossessed*. Whether migrating for seasonal agricultural work or in search of a new permanent home, rural migrants faced stiff competition when searching for urban labor. Lacking employment information, social networks, skills, and seniority, migrants of all backgrounds were often the last hired and first fired. In 1960 about 317,000 domestic migrants worked twenty-five days or more, with a yearly average of 157 days, but 10% remained unemployed at least half the year. The average earnings were \$1,016, but almost two-thirds earned under \$1,000 with combined farm and non-farm wages, and almost half experienced some involuntary employment. The condition of migrant workers was critical since approximately 225,000 children traveled alongside their families, with a third joining them in the fields, resulting in a general lack of education and high illiteracy rates among this population. See Patterson, 111-113; See also Truman Moore, “Shacktown U.S.A.: Migrant Farm Labor,” in *Poverty American Style*, ed. Herman P. Miller (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1966), 131-135.

percent of all Mexican dwellings, 7.9% of non-white dwellings, and 1/3% of Anglo dwellings. On the basis of these figures, Mexicans are even worse off than “non-whites,” which means that there is a very real basis for comparisons between the barrio and the ghetto.³¹

While the media and the public paid increasing attention to the deteriorating urban ghettos of the Northeast and Midwest and the escalating protests of the black freedom movement, Americans were just beginning to learn about Chicanos and American Indians, whether trapped in urban barrios or isolated in rural pockets of poverty and on destitute reservations throughout the Southwest, and their increasingly radical protests against poverty and racial discrimination.

EARLY CHICANO & AMERICAN INDIAN POVERTY PROTESTS

As conditions for Mexican Americans and other Latinos worsened, new organizations emerged to unite those suffering from similar political and economic problems. In 1960, shortly after JFK’s election, a group of Mexican American organizations, including the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), the Community Service Organization (CSO), and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), met in Phoenix to form a national coalition group, the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO). Many wanted to include Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other Spanish-Speaking Americans, but MAPA and CSO refused to organize such a broad coalition.³² As the Chicano movement began to emerge during the early 1960s, it did so in separate locales with different leadership. Two of the strongest movements began in 1962, as Cesar Chavez mobilized the farm workers

³¹ Elizabeth Martinez and Gilberto Lopez y Rivas, ed. *The Chicanos: Life and Struggles of the Mexican Minority in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 47.

³² Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (New

movement and Reies Lopez Tijerina, who later served as the leader of the Mexican American contingent at the Poor People's Campaign, initiated the New Mexico land grant movement. Influenced by the black freedom struggle and nationalist movements, both Chicanos and their Southwestern neighbors, American Indians, took on a new militancy. As Trattner exclaims, "'Uncle Taco' the stereotype of the servile Mexican, gave way to the 'Sons of Zapata' while the Indians bid farewell to 'Uncle Tom-Tom' and joined the movement for 'Red Power.'"³³ The PPC provided these burgeoning movements with an opportunity to coordinate their many local, grassroots campaigns into national, cohesive movements.

Latinos were not the only group organizing; American Indians, too, were protesting their dire and deteriorating circumstances. Again and again, official documents, journalists, and social scientists concurred that Indians were the poorest of the poor.³⁴ Poverty on reservations was worse than anywhere else in the nation, with over 450,000 Indians living in squalor across twenty-five states, many in urban slums.³⁵

York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 249.

³³ Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1999, 6th edition), 318.

³⁴ Ibid. See Report of the Commission on the Rights, Liberties, and Responsibilities of the American Indian, *The Indian: America's Unfinished Business* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1966), 63; Alan Sorkin, *American Indians and Federal Aid*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1971), vii.

³⁵ After the initial loss of land, by 1858 the United States had already acquired an estimated 581,000,000 acres of Indian land; after forced removal in the East and rapid development in the West, by 1887 Indians owned about 138,000,000 acres; and after assimilation and termination attempts, by 1960 the Indian holdings had shrunk to about 53,000,000 acres. In addition to a grotesque loss of land, the 1960 Census revealed severe employment and education problems. While the rate of unemployment for all males fell 64% between 1940 and 1960, the rate for all Indians rose 16%, with unemployment rates on reservations commonly reaching between 30% and 50%, sometimes higher. Data for New Mexico reveals that in that state only 27.5% of

There were several factors that made Indians poor, but none so much as land loss, now accompanied by a growing population, with high birthrates coupled with swiftly declining death rates.³⁶ Tribes were dependent on the Bureau of Indian Affairs's Welfare and Guidance Service, which was responsible for general assistance for Indians unqualified for assistance from public agencies, as well as institutional, foster-home care, and adoptions for Indian youth. But the Service's budget was nothing compared to federal expenditures, forcing many to survive on federal agricultural surplus products. Because they suffered such extreme poverty in such great numbers, Indians received disproportionately high rates of welfare—receiving more than two-fifths of ADC—but some states completely refused Indians assistance because of their tax-exempt status.³⁷

Like Chicanos and blacks, American Indians did not take exploitation and poverty lying down. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), established in 1944, represented a broad base of resistance among Indian leadership who strongly opposed the

Indians were employed, and 72.2% of families had incomes under \$4,000, with one county dropping as low as \$870. See Sorkin, 2-3.

³⁶ Indians not only fell behind national and minority averages for employment but were also decades behind in education. The median level of schooling of the Indian male in 1960 was about the same as the 1940 level of all males. Although the median level of Indians increased by nearly three years from 1940 to 1960, in 1960 the percentage of Indians attending college was only about one-third that of all males, and the percentage of Indians with no schooling or fewer than five years was more than double that of all males. Between 1940-1960 the median educational attainment of Indians and Negroes was about the same, while two to three times as many Indians as Negroes had no formal education. See Sorkin 12-18. The proportions of Indian and black males in white-collar occupations were similar in 1940, 1950, and 1960. Non-reservation Indians had unemployment rates about 15% higher than blacks. Blue-collar employment grew more rapidly for Indians, from 23.3% in 1940 to 57.6% in 1960, than for blacks whose rate increased from 38.4% to 59.6%. Between 1940-1960 the proportion of Indians engaged in agriculture greatly exceeded that of blacks. In 1960 more than one-third of all employed Indians were laborers (farm and nonfarm), compared with one-tenth of the total population, and the percentage of Indians classified as professionals in 1960 was similar to that of the total population in 1940. See *The Indian: America's Unfinished Business*, 67, 71.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

Termination Act. In June 13-20, 1961, at the American Indian Chicago Conference, 420 Indians from sixty-seven tribes gathered for a week-long meeting and produced policy papers, summarized in the Declaration of Indian Purpose, which rejected the termination of tribes and asserted the right of Indian communities to choose their own ways of life, producing the first pan-Indian protest for self-determination.³⁸

THE EARLY CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT'S DUAL AND DUELING AGENDAS

While the public is much more familiar with history of the black freedom struggle than the movements Mexican Americans and American Indians led, few people recognize that many of the movements early campaigns were poor people's movements. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, new civil rights organizations employed nonviolent tactics that directly affected the daily lives of local working-class and poor blacks. While revisionist civil rights scholars have revealed how instrumental the grassroots actions of working-class and poor people were for the successes of the civil rights movement, the media and some scholars continue to attribute the movement's gains to key leaders, such as Dr. King, or vanguard organizations, such as SNCC and CORE. Movement historians such as Manning Marable and Adam Fairclough, along with King and countless SNCC activists, have argued that the gains of the civil rights movement primarily affected the black middle class while leaving the masses of poor blacks behind.³⁹ Yet, even

³⁸ Troy R. Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination and The Rise of Indian Activism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 14. See also Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. Joan Nagel and Troy Johnson, ed., *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 13-15.

³⁹ See Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 14; and Marable, 85.

campaigns that were ostensibly about desegregation affected the local poor in significant ways.

For example, many popular depictions of the civil rights movement mark its beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott,⁴⁰ but few label this movement as a poor people's movement. While the black female educators who initiated the movement and the black male ministers who assumed the leadership once underway were both decidedly middle-class, the protesters who actually boycotted the bus system and walked to work were primarily the working poor.⁴¹ Stewart Burns, historian and former editor of the *King Papers*, proclaims that the boycott "exemplified an unparalleled unity across class lines that black movements have dreamt about since."⁴² But despite the representation of a cross-class alliance, there were still struggles over who should lead the campaign. The local black ministers displaced activists who had been organizing in Montgomery for

⁴⁰ Aldon Morris demonstrates that the Montgomery movement was modeled after an earlier bus boycott in Baton Rouge. See Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984). For histories that explore pre-1955 civil rights activism see Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); John Eagerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1994); Robin D.G. Kelley, "Congested Terrain: Resistance on Public Transportation," and "Birmingham's Untouchables" in *Race Rebels*, 55-100; for a transnational perspective see Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ The Boycott was also economic in that the local white businessmen eventually caved to the protesters' modest demands due to the economic loss the boycott had caused them since blacks ended up shopping in black-owned stores in their neighborhoods rather than white-owned stores downtown. See Martin Luther King, Jr., "Walk for Freedom," *Fellowship*, XXII (May 1956): 5-7, reprinted in *The Black Experience 1865-1978: A Documentary History* (Greenwich: Greenwich University Press, 1995), 244-251; The Boycott was also economic in that the local white businessmen eventually caved to the protesters' modest demands due to the economic loss the boycott had caused them since blacks ended up shopping in black-owned stores in their neighborhoods rather than white-owned stores downtown.

⁴² Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997), xii.

decades, such as long-time NAACP leader E.D. Nixon, Jo Ann Robinson, and other members of the Women's Political Council, while Dr. King's selection as head of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) squashed the leadership ambitions of his friend Reverend Ralph Abernathy, despite the fact that Abernathy had brought the younger and less experienced King to Montgomery.

Even Rosa Parks' arrest was tinged with intra-racial class conflict. A young woman, Claudette Colvin, was arrested on March 2, 1955, nine months before Parks, but the local leadership decided Parks' case was preferable since by the time the case went forward, Colvin was a sixteen-year-old, unwed pregnant working-class black woman while Parks was a middle-class black seamstress; yet both were experienced NAACP activists.⁴³ While the poor who boycotted their only means of transportation had risked their jobs and their safety as they embraced a tradition of decades of local resistance,⁴⁴ black ministers who led the bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, Montgomery, and Tallahassee received all of the credit. These ministers, who made their living from the support of the black community and were therefore freer to openly protest without repercussions from white employers, joined forces to form an organization to coordinate the growing activism throughout the South.

⁴³ For a detailed account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott see *Daybreak of Freedom*, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, edited by David J. Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); David J. Garrow, ed., *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishers, 1989); Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997). For a detailed account of the Baton Rouge and Tallahassee boycotts, see Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*.

⁴⁴ See Kelley, "Congested Terrain: Resistance on Public Transportation," and "Birmingham's Untouchables" in *Race Rebels*.

When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) formed in 1957 in the wake of the Montgomery Boycott, King and his coalition of black ministers committed themselves through their platform to combat both the system of segregation and its economic effects, such as inferior schools and impoverished neighborhoods.⁴⁵ In February of 1956, Bayard Rustin, an early and constant adviser to King, first proposed the idea of building a national nonviolent movement coordinated from the South that would serve as an umbrella organization connecting several local grassroots movements as affiliates.⁴⁶ Rustin, along with long-time NAACP activist Ella Baker and white liberal attorney Stanley Levison had already formed In Friendship in early 1956 in New York to conduct fundraising campaigns to support the growing southern-based movement. Rustin and Levison's socialist allegiance and Baker's persistent faith in the ability of poor people to lead themselves helped ensure that SCLC and other movement organizations would continue to pursue a dual agenda.⁴⁷ In addition to having left-leaning advisers, King was critical of both his own privileged upbringing and the rising black middle-class.

⁴⁵ see Martin Luther King, Jr., *This is SCLC* (Leaflet: Southern Christian Leadership Conference, revised edition, 1964) reprinted in *The Black Experience 1865-1978: A Documentary History* (Greenwich: Greenwich University Press, 1995), 251-253.

⁴⁶ Thomas R. Peake, *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 41.

⁴⁷ Rustin, Baker, and Levison would go on to shape the movement's direction perhaps more than any others, although always from behind-the-scenes, largely because Rustin was gay, Baker was a woman, and Levison was a supposed communist. For more on Baker, see Barbara Rabsby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003); Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: Wiley, 1998). For more on Rustin, see *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* (South Burlington, VT: California Newsreel, 2002); Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen: A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997); John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, Rutgers University Press, 2000). Most of the discussion of Levison is how he threatened King's success due to his connections with the Communist Party. For the most detailed treatment of Levison's influence see David J. Garrow's *Bearing the Cross: Martin*

As one of King's first acts as the elected leader of SCLC, he met with Labor Secretary James P. Mitchell and Vice-president Nixon on June 13, 1957, and urged them to travel to the South to witness for themselves the worsening poverty as a way to garner federal aid for the poor.⁴⁸ In his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom* (a movement guidebook for many), King declared that while the nonviolent struggle would help "end the demoralization," a "new frontal assault on poverty" would "make victory more certain," and proclaimed his commitment to a dual agenda:

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 the standards themselves. There must be a rhythmic alternation between attacking the causes and healing the effects.⁴⁹

While King remained committed to this goal throughout his life, it was a younger generation of activists who embraced Ella Baker's concept of participatory democracy that would achieve the greatest success organizing poor blacks during the early 1960s.

Ella Baker and Dr. King shared the goal of pursuing both economic and civil rights, but they also experienced problems, particularly with regards to leadership styles and gender roles. King's "cult of personality" troubled Baker, who was deeply committed to a bottom-up, group-centered leadership style based on her experience organizing for the NAACP in the South and in Harlem. Baker famously declared that "strong people don't need strong leaders" and argued that the best an organization could

Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1986).

⁴⁸ Peake, 51.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride for Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) reprinted in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin*

accomplish was “to provide financial support, media attention, and political education.”⁵⁰ Baker helped create SCLC and served as its first interim executive director. During this time she organized SCLC’s early campaigns—the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom held at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on May 17, 1957 and the 1958 “Crusade for Citizenship” voter registration campaign—and established a coalition with the Highlander Folk School and movement mother Septima Clark’s literacy and citizenship classes before leaving the organization in 1960. Frustrated with the gender discrimination within SCLC and the direction of the movement as a whole, and fearful of the increasing conflation of King and the movement, she went on to help organize and mentor one of the most influential and most radical organizations of the 1960s.⁵¹ Baker sponsored the founding meeting of what would become the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at her alma mater Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, on Easter weekend, April 16-18, 1960, which almost 175 students from thirty states attended. The young activists, many of whom had participated in the recent sit-in movement, embraced Baker’s concept of participatory democracy, which advocated group-centered leadership and promoted direct action protests.⁵²

During the early 1960s, SNCC entered Mississippi and Alabama’s poorest counties and attempted to organize the black masses on a grassroots level and assist local leadership in establishing a permanent movement. Manning Marable argues that during

Luther King, Jr., edited by James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986): 489-490.

⁵⁰ Ransby, 170.

⁵¹ For a detailed account of Baker’s frustrations with King and SCLC’s structure see Fairclough, 49-52 and Ransby, 170-195.

its formative years SNCC had “no identification with traditional working class struggles,” yet Robert Moses initiated a voter registration project in the severely impoverished Pike County, Alabama, during the summer of 1960 and in the equally destitute McCombs, Mississippi, the following year, both of which strove to combat the effects of southern poverty, one of which was disenfranchisement.⁵³ As renowned civil rights historian Charles Payne explains in his brilliant study of the Mississippi movement, SNCC “didn’t bring the movement to Mississippi, they brought it new forms of organization, new tactics, and new energy.”⁵⁴ Unlike SCLC, which SNCC critiqued for sweeping into a town, displacing the local leadership, and then abruptly leaving with the local movement disorganized and despondent,⁵⁵ the younger activists tried to bolster local leaders and organize the local community for a long-term battle rather than simply mobilizing the community for a specific event. While SCLC and SNCC differed in terms of their long-range goals, they shared the commitment to pursuing both economic and civil rights and joined forces for numerous campaigns throughout the Deep South during the early 1960s.⁵⁶ These campaigns are typically characterized as voter registration and direct

⁵² See Ella Baker, “Bigger than a Hamburger,” *Southern Patriot*, Vol. 18 (1960) for Baker’s account of SNCC’s founding conference.

⁵³ Marable, 63,66. For a challenge to Marable’s assertion that SNCC was not engaged with working-class blacks, see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁵⁴ Payne, 104.

⁵⁵ See Carson, *In Struggle*, and Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, particularly their coverage of the Albany Movement of 1961-1962.

⁵⁶ For the most detailed account of SNCC’s early grassroots organizing efforts and conflicts with SCLC see Carson, *In Struggle*, chapters 4, 5, and 6, Payne, chapters 4 and 5, and Ransby, chapters 9 and 10.

action desegregation campaigns, yet economic rights were always central to SNCC's organizing efforts in the South.⁵⁷

POVERTY POLITICS

The civil rights movement's focus on economic rights and its exposure of the connections between racial discrimination and economic exploitation were factors that John F. Kennedy wished to obscure when he agreed to endorse the 1963 March on Washington, yet poverty was an issue the young politician had embraced during his presidential candidacy. In 1960 Kennedy helped popularize the discovery of poverty and furthered his political aspirations while on a campaign trip to visit poor whites in the mountains of West Virginia. Robert Levine suggests that while Kennedy must have encountered stark poverty previously while campaigning for Congress in the late 1940s and 1950s in "the wooden tenements of Charlestown, Massachusetts," he had never seen an entire group of people so isolated and mired in poverty as the Appalachians of West Virginia.⁵⁸ The 1960 election was hotly contested because the two major candidates, Kennedy and Nixon, had very few differences—both were strictly anti-communist and neither had a concrete plan for domestic policy. Kennedy's trip to West Virginia gave

⁵⁷ Bayard Rustin explains, "And so in Mississippi, thanks largely to the leadership of Bob Moses, a turn toward political action has been taken. More than voter registration is involved here. A conscious bid for *political power* is being made, and in the course of that effort a tactical shift is being affected. Direct action techniques are being subordinated to a strategy calling for the building of community institutions or power bases. Clearly the implications of this shift reach far beyond Mississippi." See Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement, 1964" in *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, ed. Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (Cleis Press), 117-118.

⁵⁸ Robert A. Levine, *The Poor Ye Need not Have With You: Lessons from The War on Poverty* by (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1970), 32.

him an issue that he could own and helped him solidify his nomination for the Democratic ticket.

A call to Coretta Scott King while her husband sat in an Atlanta jail cell for protesting segregation reportedly swayed the black vote towards Kennedy, securing him the presidency, yet rather than starting off his first year with a strong commitment to civil rights, Kennedy initiated a poverty campaign focused almost exclusively on Appalachia. Further influenced by a slew of articles on rural Kentucky and other Appalachian areas,⁵⁹ some of Kennedy's first acts as president were signing new legislation to aid the area, with the Area Redevelopment Act in 1961, followed by the Public Works Acceleration Act and the Appalachian Redevelopment Act of 1962.⁶⁰ In addition to federal legislation, the National Farmer's Union established the National Policy Committee in Pockets of Poverty, and the Appalachian Regional Commission, which consisted of representatives from each Appalachian state and all major federal agencies, developed a unified plan for the region.

The conditions in Appalachia warranted the attention. During the late 1940s, coal production decreased, as did mountain farming and the lumber industry, destroying the region's economy, leaving one out of three families below the \$3,000 poverty line, unemployment at 7.1% compared to the national average of 5%, an extremely high

⁵⁹ See William Francois, "Where Poverty is Permanent," *Reporter* (April 27, 1961): 38-39; John Ed Pearce, "The Superfluous People of Hazard, Kentucky," *Reporter* (January 3, 1963): 33; Thomas B. Morgan, "Portrait of an Underdeveloped Country: Appalachia U.S.A.," *Look* (Dec 4, 1962): 25-33; stories on Homer Bigart: "Kentucky Miners: A Grim Winter," *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1963, 1, 79; *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1963, 21.

⁶⁰ J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 144.

illiteracy rate,⁶¹ and over half of West Virginians reliant on surplus food aid.⁶² Kentucky ex-legislator Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area*—a popular book often compared to *The Jungle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—along with a CBS documentary, further exposed the economic collapse of Appalachia to the rest of the nation.⁶³ While Appalachian poor were receiving much needed sympathetic attention, poverty was becoming an increasingly racialized and gendered political problem in other areas.

Two major welfare crises erupted in 1960 in Louisiana and in 1961 in Newburgh, New York, that resulted in a backlash against the increasing welfare rolls and charges of mass corruption of welfare. The shift from ADC to ADC-UP (Unemployed Parent) expanded the reach of ADC to include children of unemployed parents, typically the father, as well as those already receiving aid due to the parent's desertion, divorce, death, or incapacitation, and established the federally funded but locally operated Community Work and Training Programs (CWTPS) intended to employ those included under the new amendment.⁶⁴ Jennifer Mittelstadt maintains that the welfare crises that resulted with the upsurge in relief “irrevocably altered the political landscape of welfare,” and forever racialized and gendered welfare, portraying it as a program that allowed lazy single mothers not to work while destroying families in the process. Despite vicious attacks

⁶¹ Flynt, 142.

⁶² PBS *America's War on Poverty* Part 1 “In This Affluent Society” (Blackside, Inc., 1995).

⁶³ Harry Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1962). “Appalachia: The Path From Disaster,” *The Nation*, March 9, 1964, 239-241.

⁶⁴ Mittelstadt, 176; CWTPS was renamed in 1964 when AFDC work and training programs were incorporated into the larger War on Poverty and changed the name to Work Experience Programs (WEPS).

from the public and politicians like Louisiana's governor, who referred to the 6,000 women he helped cut from the welfare rolls as "a bunch of prostitutes,"⁶⁵ in 1962 ADC-UP grew even more inclusive, becoming Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The expanded program increased funding of CWTPS and opened the program to recipients who were not necessarily "unemployed parents," enforced the minimum aid requirements, and encouraged new projects and research.

The 1962 welfare amendments extended AFDC yet again to meet needs of two-parent families whose heads were unemployed, but the addition was not mandatory, and many states denied AFDC-UP benefits. The expansion of coverage demonstrated the growing influence of social workers on policy makers with groups like the American Public Welfare Association, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the National Social Welfare Assembly increasingly influencing proposals to reform welfare and amend the Social Security Act.⁶⁶ Despite the expansions of AFDC, the two welfare crises set in motion a conservative backlash against welfare and single, primarily black, mothers.⁶⁷

While Kennedy's successor attacked the explosive issue of race, gender, poverty, and government relief head on as part of a grand war on poverty, the New Frontiersman instead initiated a campaign to combat juvenile delinquency. Juvenile delinquency became a hot topic in the 1950s and early 1960s and was increasingly depicted in popular culture. Movies of the post-war era like *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause*,

⁶⁵ Mittelstadt, 17.

⁶⁶ Patterson, 131.

rebellious rock-n-roll music,⁶⁸ and the literature of the Beats, who themselves represented the most pronounced romanticization of poverty and rejection of the “affluent society,” revealed society’s interest in rebellious youth. Historian James Gilbert argues that just like those who “discovered” poverty had done, many ignored delinquency’s earlier roots, suggesting the supposed rise resulted from the new teen culture coming between parents and their children.

The debates over poverty and delinquency during the 1950s and 1960s were comparable and differed from past conceptions in significant ways: The debates were more universal; new academic fields, such as communications research and poverty studies, were developing to provide better knowledge. In addition, the homogenization of American society and dominance of the nuclear family made falling outside prescribed norms seem more pathological.⁶⁹ While government officials, census bureau

⁶⁷ This trend eventually led to the destruction of the welfare system with the help of Bill Clinton, a Democratic president of poor white origins who many have quipped was our “first black president.”

⁶⁸ Ehrenreich, 25-27.

⁶⁹ The argument was both old and new—in the 1920s “flaming youth” looked to silent films rather than parents for clues on how to live, but popular culture for teens had exploded and was increasingly accessible as teens’ spending money grew. While Tom Clark’s Continuing Committee on Delinquency served as an important forbearer, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin’s community delinquency projects and 1960 *Delinquency and Opportunity* became the heart of President Kennedy’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime established in 1961. Building on Columbia sociologist Robert Merton’s “opportunity theory,” which argued that crime and social deviance were rational responses to the gap between aspirations and access to legitimate resources, Cloward and Ohlin’s maintained that delinquency grew out of economic and social injustices and that the key to solving it was not in reforming the individual, but through community organization. Cloward and Ohlin put their theory into praxis with the Mobilization for Youth (MYF) project on New York’s Lower East Side, and its success bolstered federal planners confidence in community organizing, leading to the Ford Foundation Gray Areas project of 1961-1962, which provided a series of community planning and action grants, as well as the War on Poverty’s Community Action Projects (CAP). While these early attempts exhibited promising ideas about and tools for combating juvenile delinquency, there was still little attention given to poverty beyond how it affected young people and Appalachian whites. See Richard A.

administrators, and social scientists had “discovered” poverty and had begun debating its causes and possible remedies during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the public remained unaware of the extent of poverty existing amid post-war affluence.

EXPOSING THE “OTHER AMERICA”

During the early 1960s, several journalists perpetuated the myth of absolute affluence by comparing the poor in the U.S. to the poor of third world countries, making poverty within this country seem an aberration that many believed must have been a choice.⁷⁰ But in the coming year, a handful of writers exposed both the causes and effects of poverty in the United States and mobilized the nation to declare war on poverty.

While several publications emerged in 1962 that discussed the causes and extent of poverty, Michael Harrington’s *The “Other” America* is most often cited as sparking the nation’s rediscovery of poverty and prompting the government to act. A writer for the *Catholic Worker*, and editor for *Dissent* and the Socialist Party bi-weekly, *New America*, Harrington reintroduced the nation to the “other” America which had disappeared from sight due to an abundance of cheap, mass-produced clothing that created the best-dressed poor people in the world, as well as larger structural changes—such as suburbanization, white flight, and the concentration of poverty in urban centers

Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity: a Theory of Delinquent Gangs* (Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1960). See also O’Connor, 131; Gilbert, 217.

⁷⁰ See Ehrenreich, 43. Writing in *The Commonweal* in August of 1961, Julian Marias, in “Reflections on Poverty,” suggested that while poverty “involves limitations that must not be ignored” it also “provides for choices: a certain simplicity, an authentic and harmonious course, fewer temptations and cares, a greater proximity to the deep sources of life, the possibility of ‘traveling light.’” He goes on to describe a trip to India, where poverty is “accepted as a condition of life” and “seemed to be not far from a state of well-being or, if you prefer, happiness.” See Julian Marias, in “Reflections on Poverty,” *The Commonweal* (August 11, 1961): 439-441.

and isolated rural areas.⁷¹ *The Other America* served as both an expose and a call to arms comparable to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Harrington dismissed critics who argued that comparatively, the U.S. poverty problem was miniscule, and instead insisted that there was an ethical obligation to help the poor in a rich nation, charging the nation with creating "an outrage and a scandal" with so much poverty amid affluence.

Harrington lifted the veil, exposing the various groups that made up the "other" America: the unemployed whose skills had become obsolete as a result of automation and deindustrialization; the migrant workers, sharecroppers, small farmers, and Appalachians; the urban black poor; the aged; the mentally ill; poor intellectuals; the alcoholic poor; and the rural poor relocated to urban slums, many of which were represented in large numbers in the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. White House Fellow Doris Kearns Goodwin marveled years later at the power of *The Other America*:

"Somehow just the details that he brought to life in that book of the way people lived in poverty, the kind of things I'd never seen before. And the numbers of people that were living in poverty just struck me as something I couldn't imagine . . . it was one of those moments . . . of feeling that something has to be done about this."⁷²

Yet many readers never made it into the details beyond the first chapter, "The Invisible Land," which was reproduced time and again in magazines, journals, and anthologies on poverty, where Harrington established his argument and defined poverty in two significant ways. First, he provided a statistical definition, claiming a total poverty population of forty to fifty million, which many critiqued as too high, especially when

⁷¹ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

compared to *Poverty and Deprivation's* figures, which reported a total of thirty-five million poor based on a \$3,000 family poverty line. But it was Harrington's second definition of poverty that was more problematic and misused. Unintentionally popularizing the culture of poverty theory, Harrington insisted there was "a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a worldview of the poor."⁷³ Barbara Ehrenreich argues that Harrington's discovery of poverty enabled middle-class whites to externalize their fears and project onto the poor their anxieties over the softening of character and flexible values that resulted from affluence, and in the process constructed the poor as an infantilized "Other" and proposed poverty solutions that focused more on eliminating the poor than poverty.⁷⁴

Despite its later influence, the book itself didn't create a big stir until Dwight McDonald's review, "Our Invisible Poor" appeared in the January 19, 1963, issue of *The New Yorker*.⁷⁵ The rest of the country learned about poverty in 1963 through a series of

⁷² PBS America's War on Poverty Part 1 "In This Affluent Society" (Blackside, Inc., 1995).

⁷³ Harrington, 17.

⁷⁴ Ehrenreich, 48-54.

⁷⁵ McDonald critiqued Harrington's *The Other America* alongside Gabriel Kolko's *Wealth and Power in America* and *Income and Welfare in the United States*, compiled by four socio-economists from the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. He criticized Harrington for his lack of citations, bibliography, and index, as well as his "impressionistic" view of statistics but insisted that Harrington's two main arguments—that mass poverty still existed and was disappearing more slowly than assumed—were sound. McDonald revealed that the rediscovery of poverty was not limited to the U.S, citing a series of articles in the *New Statesman* in the fall of 1962 and a new book by Professor Richard D Titmuss of the London School of Economics that reawakened England to poverty. McDonald insisted that the importance of these studies was that they made poverty "vivid to those who run things—the 31% whose incomes are between \$7,500 and \$14,999 and the 7% of the top-most top dogs, who get \$15,000 or more." The review's format, even more than its content, might have moved readers to take some action. Appearing in the *New Yorker* as a thin strip of text surrounded by ads for luxurious stays at Chicago's Ambassador Hotel, pricey clothes at Saks Fifth Avenue, and amid articles about social elites, this contrast of affluence and poverty made its eradication seem more compelling and feasible. McDonald further provoked the elite, warning that the "richest city of all," New York,

exposes on the topic. The week after McDonald's review appeared in the *New Yorker*, Henry Miller, Special Assistant to the Director of the Census and Professor of Economics at American University, published an article in the *Nation* that reinforced the rediscovery, exposing the issue to the *Nation's* middle-class, professional readership with solid text accompanied by small, applicable pictures. Miller, who later became an influential policy adviser, pleaded with his readers to help the poor on both humanitarian grounds and as part of a Cold War effort, but he also patronizingly recommended that "our latter-day minority groups,"—blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans—ask themselves why they are still poor when other groups "were amalgamated in the American scene within a reasonable period of time."⁷⁶ These "latter-day minority groups," who later made up the ranks of the Poor People's Campaign, had unique histories of exploitation and racism that resulted in their residual poverty and cannot be directly compared to the standard European immigrant experience.

In February 1963, a month after Miller's article appeared, the rest of the nation learned of the "discovery" when a television documentary on poverty "lit up the White House switchboard with inquiries about what was being done for the poor."⁷⁷ For those who missed Harrington's book or McDonald and Miller's articles, Ben H. Bagdikian exposed the "invisible Americans" to middle America in a *Saturday Evening Post* special report. The article consisted of extensive photographs with brief descriptions detailing the individual experiences of members from the "latter-day minority groups" in a much

was steadily growing poorer. See Dwight McDonald, "Our Invisible Poor" *The New Yorker*, January 19, 1963, 82-134.

⁷⁶ Herman P. Miller, "The American Poor: The Tools They Need," *The Nation*, January 26, 1963, 65-68.

more sympathetic manner than Miller, commenting on how it cost more to be poor than ever before:

Children must go to school: thus law as well as custom demands a higher standard of living. And the family without a car is lacking what has become a basic tool of American surviving: The factories and shopping centers have fled to the suburbs, as have the experienced city-dwellers.⁷⁸

Bagdikian's piece was not only sympathetic, but also very comprehensive, covering Appalachian miners, black farmers, Mexican migrant workers, American Indians, blacks in urban ghettos—all of whom were represented among PPC participants. In the coming months, countless articles would appear from a variety of sources. Preachers made ethical pleas based on Christian principles to support the poor who could not help themselves,⁷⁹ while journalists celebrated the revolutionary spirit of the poor who were fighting their exploitation and destitution. Most journalists reinforced the culture of poverty theory and demonized the poor, yet there were some radical exceptions, such as an article by a liberal legal scholar that demonstrated the legal precedent for interpreting freedom from poverty as a constitutional right.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ O'Connor, 141.

⁷⁸ Ben H. Bagdikian (Photography by Bill Bridges), "Poverty: A Special Report, The Invisible Americans" *Saturday Evening Post*, December 21, 1963, 28-37.

⁷⁹ John C. Bennet, "The Ethics of Poverty," in *Poverty in Affluence*, 268-274; originally from *The Churches and Persistent Pockets of Poverty in the U.S.A.* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1962), 3-8.

⁸⁰ See Don Marsh, "Chaos in the Coal Fields," *The Nation*, January 26, 1963, 69-72; and Nathan Glazer, "The Puerto Ricans," *Commentary* (July 1963): 1-9. Glazer is a mixed bag; he recognizes the efforts of Puerto Rican social workers, professionals, and teachers who set up an organization called *Aspira* in an attempt to improve educational opportunities and describes the extent of poverty among Puerto Ricans, but he also makes some problematic statements about skin color and behavior that reflect a culture of poverty perspective. See also Thomas A. Hoadley, "Is the Right Against Poverty Another Constitutional Right?" *American Bar Association Journal* (December 1963): 1192-1194. Hoadley recounts that in 1941, Justice Byrnes in *Edwards v. California* overturned an 1837 judgment in which "the Supreme Court labeled poverty as viciousness and spoke of 'the moral pestilence of paupers'" and instead declared that "'Poverty

Yet the culture of poverty concept quickly became pervasive and enabled social scientists to expand their role by advocating for the expansion of social programs and relief, while labeling the poor as passive and helpless without aid from liberal intellectuals like them. Sociologists analyzed poor people's behavioral characteristics and argued that they projected their behavior onto their kids, creating generational, cyclical poverty, ensuring social scientists' importance for generations to come.⁸¹ These professionals used their own middle-class values and norms as the standard by which to measure the deviant poor and offered a new explanation for why the poor had yet to rise up in protest, either in the streets or through the political system. Michael Katz argues that while Marxism's explanation of false consciousness "appeared increasingly facile and patronizing," the culture of poverty theory's complex interpretation "connected the objective sources of exploitation with the psychology and behavior of everyday life" and its emphasis on adaptation and coping strategies "preserved some dignity and rationality for the poor even as it deplored the culture that resulted and stressed the importance of intervention by sympathetic elites."⁸² The culture of poverty theory shaped the direction and frame interpretations of public policy issues for decades to come.⁸³

and immorality are not synonymous" in a landmark case that marked "the entry of the United States Supreme Court into the battle against discrimination of an oppressed minority—the indigent." His current concern is indigent prisoners and their inability to exhaust state remedies because of lack of money to pay for the services. He cites several cases throughout the 1950s that suggest freedom from poverty is gradually being established as a legal right comparable to that of freedom from discrimination due to race, religion, etc.

⁸¹ Robert J. Havighurst, et al. *Growing Up in River City* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1962).

⁸² Katz, 21.

⁸³ In his 1962 *The Culturally Deprived Child*, Frank Reissman challenged the notion poor children were uninterested in education, suggesting that rather than being culturally deprived,

While Harrington's *The Other America*: is the text typically attributed with "discovering" poverty, a cadre of social scientists, government officials, and academics published comprehensive studies on the topic that directly affected politicians and public policy. One of the first of many poverty conferences, the Conference on Economic Progress, held in Washington, D.C., April 1962, produced an important study led by University of Wisconsin economist Robert Lampman and initiated at Kennedy's request. While Harrington and other liberal activists dismissed Lampman's faith in the economy as poverty's salve, the conference produced a detailed list of specific policy proposals, recommending that the government should state higher goals for ending unemployment and treating poverty by raising the federal budget by about three billion, enlarging transfer payments under Social Security, reducing the tax burden on low income families, liberalizing monetary policy, increasing wages consistent with reasonable price stability, and initiating an all-out attack on farm poverty. Lampman estimated that thirty-eight million lived in poverty and argued that poverty was not an individual problem, but a systemic problem that required public reform.⁸⁴ The study projected that the number of poor families could be reduced from about 10.5 million in 1960 to two million in 1965, and to half a million by 1970, but to do so, he argued that a comprehensive health insurance program, an increase in general public assistance grants, and substantial wage

they had a culture of their own that they developed to cope with their environment. See Frank Reissman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

⁸⁴ Conference on Economic Progress, *Poverty and Deprivation in the United States: The Plight of Two-Fifths Of a Nation* (Washington, D.C., April 1962), 8-11.

increases were all needed.⁸⁵ Lampman became one of the Johnson Administration's top advisers, and *Poverty and Deprivation* served as the main blueprint for the War on Poverty.

Two other prominent economists contributed their views in 1962. Influential Swedish economist Gunther Myrdal published his *Challenge to Affluence*, arguing that, despite the rhetoric of affluence, the economy was rather weak—due to excessive national defense costs and the deterioration of the U.S. position on the world market—and too susceptible to recessions with high and rising levels of unemployment despite a growing economy, massive production, and plentiful resources. Myrdal presented a structural rather than behavioral analysis of poverty and advocated for “vigorous measures” to create greater opportunity and increase equality. Yet, he too contributed to the culture of poverty theory by stressing the cyclical nature of poverty, describing “the operation of a vicious circle tending to create in America an unprivileged class of unemployed, unemployables, and underemployed who are more and more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions, and its achievements.”⁸⁶ He coined the term “underclass” to describe this group, and unintentionally created one of the most frequently used and pejorative terms in poverty discourse.⁸⁷ Yet, Myrdal continued to express his frustration with the U.S. obsession with

⁸⁵ *Poverty and Deprivation in the United States*, 75-93.

⁸⁶ Gunnar Myrdal, *Challenge to Affluence* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), 10.

⁸⁷ Herbert Gans emphasizes that Myrdal did not use pejorative language to describe the “underclass” and did not characterize this group by race, gender, or cultural behavior. Gans explains that underclass was not used in a pejorative way until after the mid-1960s riots, the liberalization of the welfare system, and the white backlash that ensued as a result. See Herbert J. Gans, *The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Anti-Poverty Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 28-29.

studying the causes of wealth and the excessive research and funding spent on the “development of means of self-destruction and the contest to conquer space,” while poverty knowledge was still largely based on moralistic assumptions and poorly researched.⁸⁸ Like Myrdal, John Kenneth Galbraith updated his position on the causes of poverty and called for more scientific definitions and quantitative research, rather than behavioral explanations.

In the coming years a flood of writing on poverty would emerge, some critically engaged social science literature, some propagandistic journalism, most of which in one way or another advocated greater government action while still patronizing or even maligning the poor. While academics and government officials were debating the causes and extent of poverty and brainstorming possible remedies, poor people of color were increasingly occupying public space to protest for both racial and economic rights. As we shall see, as activists escalated and intensified their protests, government officials paid increasing attention to the poor and expanded social programs to meet their needs.

PURSUING THE DUAL AGENDA: ECONOMIC RIGHTS AS CIVIL RIGHTS

The relationship between poverty and disenfranchisement became clear in Greenwood, Mississippi, during the spring of 1963. The Leflore County Board of Supervisors sought reprisal for the SNCC-initiated voter registration campaign by cutting distribution of most surplus commodities for the 27,000 residents, mostly black, who relied on meager commodities of meal, rice, flour, and sugar to sustain them through the winter months. Charles Payne argues that this strategy backfired and further radicalized

⁸⁸ John Kenneth Galbraith, “The Causes of Poverty: A Clinical View,” *Population Review* (July

the local community who now had nothing to lose. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)—recently reorganized as a collective of CORE, NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC activists working in the Deep South—capitalized on the county’s mean-spiritedness, exploiting it as an opportunity to expose the connections between racial discrimination, labor exploitation, and political disenfranchisement. The activists responded with a food drive, transforming a voter registration campaign into an explicitly anti-poverty campaign.⁸⁹ SCLC learned from SNCC’s skills in organizing poor blacks and responded to the younger, more radical activists’ critiques of SCLC’s leadership style as the older and more decidedly middle-class organization attempted to build strong local movements while pursuing a national campaign for both economic and civil rights.

SCLC’s most successful venture during the early 1960s was its campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. While Project “C” (for confrontation) was primarily a nonviolent direct-action desegregation campaign, local leader Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth identified a three-tiered structure of oppression in his “Birmingham Manifesto,” acknowledging that local blacks were “segregated racially, exploited economically, and dominated politically.” King’s landmark “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” decried that “the vast majority” of blacks were “smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society.”⁹⁰ As battles between Birmingham’s notorious police chief, Bull Connor, and activists escalated, images of water from fire hoses pelting young men and women and vicious police dogs mauling defenseless activists provoked a swift and

1962), 62-66

⁸⁹ Payne, 158-159.

marked response from the nation and the international community who watched the events transpire on television and in the newspapers.

While the images of the Birmingham movement reportedly persuaded President Kennedy to call for a comprehensive Civil Rights Act, they also revealed the dueling tactics of the movement's leadership and Birmingham's working-class and poor blacks. Movement veterans practiced non-violent direct action techniques, while social movement scholar Robin Kelley insists that local working class and poor blacks labeled as "wineheads," and "riff-raff," "resisted injustice and oppression on their own terms" as the "so-called 'onlookers' taunted police, retaliated with fists, profanity, rocks, and bottles, and if possible escaped into their own neighborhoods."⁹¹ While some movement historians have highlighted the legislative successes that came out of the Birmingham movement, the competing needs and tactics of local working-class and poor blacks and middle-class movement leaders revealed some intra-racial, class divisions.

SCLC struggled to reach poor blacks in the South, while one of the oldest and more conservative organizations, the National Urban League (NUL), pursued a new, national strategy promoting the dual agenda—the Domestic Marshall Plan, which sought to rebuild deteriorating inner city communities in the U.S. as the nation had done for war-torn Europe. While the U.S. during the post-World War II era was working hard to help the struggling, often newly decolonized Third World countries abroad in an attempt to persuade their new leaders to embrace a capitalist system over a communist one,

⁹⁰ Fred L. Shuttlesworth and N.H. Smith, "The Birmingham Manifesto," *Freedomways* (Winter 1964): 20-21; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," reprinted in the *New Leader* (June 24, 1963): 3-11.

⁹¹ Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 88.

Americans were experiencing severe poverty and hunger across the nation.⁹² Whitney M. Young, Jr., dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work, who had become the new leader of the NUL in 1961, proposed a controversial plan that Dona and Charles Hamilton argue shaped social welfare policy debates into the 1990s. Just as the United States had come to the aid of devastated, war-torn Europe in their time of need, Young issued a statement on June 9, 1963, calling for preferential treatment for blacks in the realms of work and education to compensate for past and current discrimination.

Responding to increasing cries to act immediately and in more aggressive ways, Young presented general guidelines rather than specific legislative goals but established a timetable for both implementation of new programs and evaluation of existing programs. With new, more radical civil rights organizations at the helm of the movement, Young sought to gain attention from the public, the media, and in particular, the Kennedy administration.⁹³ While Young came to be a key civil rights adviser to Lyndon Johnson, an immediate backlash ensued from whites against Young's call for preferential treatment. White critics like Daniel Bell argued that these demands violated "the American philosophical creed," while others claimed the plan was "reverse discrimination."⁹⁴ Hamilton and Hamilton explain that liberal whites typically proposed universal social welfare programs and minimized the emphasis on discrimination, while

⁹² See Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire* for a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Cold War foreign policy and domestic civil rights movements.

⁹³ Hamilton and Hamilton, 128-134.

⁹⁴ See Daniel Bell, "Plea for a 'New Phase in Negro Leadership,'" *New York Times Magazine*, May 31, 1964, 29; and Kyle Haselden, "Should There Be Compensation for Negroes, No," *New York Times Magazine*, Oct 8, 1963, 43; cited in Hamilton and Hamilton, 132.

civil rights groups supported universal programs but would not deny the effects of both past and present discrimination.⁹⁵ This debate emerged in full force as the government attempted to combat poverty under a president who acknowledged the need for “affirmative action” but also promoted the culture of poverty theory.

A year of activism culminated in one of the grandest expressions of the commitment to both racial and economic rights—the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The 1963 March transformed the nation’s capitol into a site of persistent protest. Participants of all ages demonstrated for economic improvements, and while almost 300 congressmen were in attendance, they were invited to listen, not speak.⁹⁶ The events’ primary organizers, socialist activists A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, envisioned the one-day march as a nationwide attempt to lobby for more jobs and less discrimination. The man who inspired both the 1941 March on Washington Movement and the 1963 March, A. Philip Randolph, declared that a decent livelihood was the basis of all civil rights and called for “investment politics, tax policies, public works policies.”⁹⁷ The March’s official demands included both civil rights items, such as immediate school desegregation, filibuster-free civil rights legislation, and protection of citizens’ rights to protest peacefully free from police brutality. But the demands also included a radical economic agenda that called for a “massive Federal Public Works

⁹⁵ Hamilton and Hamilton, 134.

⁹⁶ Bayard Rustin quoted in Hampton and Fayer, 169.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Hamilton and Hamilton, 127.

program” for the unemployed, a national minimum wage of \$2.00, and enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.⁹⁸

Several of the speeches of the day echoed the calls for both economic and civil rights. While many poor people made the journey to Washington, SNCC Chairman John Lewis opened his speech by declaring “we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here. They have no money for their transportation, they are receiving starvation wages, or no wages at all,”⁹⁹ and Walter Reuther of the United Automobile Workers called for full and fair employment.¹⁰⁰ The media has sanitized King’s speech, as each year the optimistic and extemporaneous “I Have a Dream” portion is replayed rather than the more radical content of the speech in which he declares that “the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” insisting that the purpose of the March was “to dramatize an appalling condition,”¹⁰¹ a tactic SCLC would employ five years later with Resurrection City.

⁹⁸ *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—August 28, 1963*, Organizing Manual No. 1, National Office, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 170 West 130th Street, New York, NY, reprinted in Hamilton and Hamilton, 126.

⁹⁹ John Lewis, “Address at the March on Washington,” reprinted in *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 219.

¹⁰⁰ Hamilton and Hamilton, 127.

¹⁰¹ The “I Have a Dream” portion of the speech was improvised at the behest of Mahalia Jackson who reportedly leaned over to King after noticing the crowd’s cool response and told King to “tell them about the Dream.” For a full account of this encounter and Mahalia’s role in the movement see Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, and the Soul of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 4-10. Adam Fairclough explains that King had used this refrain in recent speeches and suggests that the reason the “I Have A Dream” passage had such an extreme effect was due to the context rather than content. He argues that most whites had never been exposed to black oratory, and that King’s speeches were adapted for different audiences: “The speaking style King used in addressing a predominantly black rally bore little resemblance to the flat, bland diction which he usually reserved for white audiences.” See Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 155.

While the March is heralded as one of the great successes of the civil rights era, historians like Manning Marable proclaim that it failed to change any votes in Congress regarding the pending Civil Rights Act,¹⁰² much less address the economic items proposed. Critiques from abroad and domestic media reports of backlashes¹⁰³ reveal that popular perceptions of the March have softened over the years. As SNCC activist Bob Zellner explains, the media have sanitized the images of King and the 1963 March to fit with a more acceptable image of the nation's race relations:

“The forces that constituted the target of the March those forty years ago are still in power and Martin Luther King, Jr. is now an emasculated saint of sweetness and light and ‘nonviolence.’ Those who have elevated him and now sing his praises, did not sing his praises when he was preparing a radical poor people’s march on Washington, and opposing the war in Vietnam.”¹⁰⁴

Not only are heroic characterizations of King inaccurate and misleading, the representation of the March as a celebratory, picnic-like event ignores the competing agendas taking place behind-the-scenes among the organizers, speakers, and the Kennedy Administration.

What the 1963 March accomplished was a visual representation of peaceful integration, increased involvement of and support from religious organizations for the movement, and international recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr. as the most

¹⁰² See Hamilton and Hamilton, 125; Marable, 75.

¹⁰³ See “Ghana Decries Promises,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1963, 19; “Coast Demonstrations Held By Rights Group and Nazis” from *The Los Angeles Times*, reprinted in *The New York Times*, August 29, 1963; “3 Rights Buses Are Stoned, Baltimore, August 28,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1963.

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Henry Bass, *Like a Mighty Stream: The March on Washington, August 28, 1963* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2002), 39. Zellner continues his critique of current leadership and their failure to adopt King’s true teachings: “It goes without saying that our non-elected President and his family retainers have not adopted nonviolence as their weapon of choice in Afghanistan but rather the New World Order of continuous war, where the terrorists replace the worn out old Red Bear.”

charismatic leader of the movement.¹⁰⁵ While the 1963 March created the image of a peaceful, united demonstration, as the 200,000 person-strong interracial group dressed in their Sunday best created a delightful atmosphere, the goals of the mass march were militant, and many controversies occurred both behind-the-scenes and more openly in the press. In late June of 1963, Kennedy met with thirty civil rights leaders in an attempt to call off the march, and when that proved unsuccessful, the president co-opted the march for his own purpose—to build support in Congress for his proposed Civil Rights Act.¹⁰⁶ Members of Congress were terrified of the march,¹⁰⁷ despite the fact that all of Washington’s 2,900 police, as well as 1,000 police from nearby suburbs, 1,700 National Guardsmen, and “350 club-carrying firemen” were required to be on duty for the event, as they were five years later in even stronger numbers for the PPC.¹⁰⁸

While many were pleased with the day’s outcome, others saw the march as a cop-out. Malcolm X deemed the event the “Farce on Washington” yet still made an appearance in the nation’s capital.¹⁰⁹ Although SNCC participated, many of its increasingly radical members criticized the event’s outcome. Zellner recounts how SNCC activists hoped the march would be “a militant challenge to a foot-dragging

¹⁰⁵ See Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 154-155. Not only did Americans witness the interracial picnic-like display, but the televised event also served as a powerful weapon for the Cold War rhetoric promoting American democracy. See “Europeans View the March on TV, But Moscow Cancels Show,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1963.

¹⁰⁶ See Hampton and Fayer, chapter 10 and Bass, *Like A Mighty Wind* chapter 6 for more on the Kennedy Administration’s relationship to the 1963 March.

¹⁰⁷ See Attorney General Burke Marshall’s testimony in Hampton and Fayer, 161. Congress would be equally if not more terrified of the Poor People’s Campaign’s month-long occupation of the National Mall.

¹⁰⁸ Hampton and Fayer, 161; Bass, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, 221.

government—an angry, yet jubilant wake-up alarm,”¹¹⁰ yet that vision did not materialize. The event’s organizers forced SNCC’s National Chairman John Lewis to censor passages of his speech deemed too inflammatory,¹¹¹ and both the organizers and the Kennedy Administration controlled the day’s schedule of speeches and singing with a heavy hand, “allowing only prescribed picket signs.”¹¹² As Zellner recounts, SNCC activists and other young militants challenged the orderliness of the day by “joining hands in a huge circle just below the speakers’ stand, and singing our hearts to the heights.”¹¹³

The conflicts were not just generational or political agendas; they were also gendered. The original plans failed to include even one woman on the list of speakers until Anna Arnold Hedgeman, the only woman on the March’s Administrative Committee, sent a blistering letter condemning the “Big Six”¹¹⁴ for leaving women out of the program. Her protest resulted in Daisy Bates’ brief presentation of a “Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom” honoring Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Gloria

¹¹⁰ Bob Zellner quoted in Bass, 37.

¹¹¹ Rather than the revolutionary rhetoric of the speech calling for “One Man, One Vote,” or deeming the civil rights act as “too little, too late” it was Lewis’ “calling patience a ‘dirty and nasty word’ had sent O’Boyle through the ceiling.” For a more detailed account of the controversy over Lewis’ speech, see Lewis, 219-223. *Voices of Freedom* chapter 10, and “Prelate Objects to Rights Speech: Archbishop Gives Invocation After Talk is Revised,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1963.

¹¹² Carson, 94.

¹¹³ Bob Zellner quoted in Bass, 38.

¹¹⁴ The “Big Six” were the primary six men involved in the planning of the March on Washington and the six preeminent male leaders of the civil rights movement at this time, including A. Philip Randolph, the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins, SNCC’s National Chairman John Lewis, National Urban League President Whitney Young, SCLC’s Martin Luther King, and CORE’s National Chairman James Farmer. Along with excluding women leaders, the “Big Six” also excluded the 1963 March’s primary organizer, Bayard Rustin, whose 1955 California indecency charge made public his homosexuality, forever limiting his role in the spotlight despite the fact that he has been remembered as one of the, if not he most, effective organizers of the era.

Richardson, and two recent widows of armed civil rights activists, Mrs. Herbert Lee and Myrlie Evers, wife of Mississippi NAACP activist Medgar Evers.¹¹⁵ Many of the same problems that occurred behind-the-scenes at the '63 March were repeated during the PPC, yet as early as 1968, the media had forgotten that there were any disputes in 1963. By 1968, the press deemed the earlier march a grand success, while labeling the PPC's smaller but comparable Solidarity Day March a let down and constantly criticizing all aspects of the PPC.

The March on Washington made clear to the nation, to the world, that Martin Luther King, Jr. was the most charismatic and influential figure of the civil rights movement. In his third book,¹¹⁶ *Why We Can't Wait*, King provided a detailed account of the Birmingham movement couched in between some of his most radical writings on the relationship between race and class. He began with a depiction of a young black boy "sitting in front of a vermin-infested apartment house in Harlem" and a young black girl "sitting on the stoop of a rickety wooden one-family house in Birmingham," followed by statistics demonstrating the economic gap between whites and blacks in every area of social life.¹¹⁷ King warned that these children knew the rich history of black protest and had heard of independence movements in Africa, and would not accept inequality. Recognizing 1963 as the one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, King insisted that many blacks felt they were still not free because they "live within two concentric circles of segregation. One imprisons them on the basis of color, while the

¹¹⁵ See Bass, chapter 6 for more on the controversy surrounding women's participation in the March.

¹¹⁶ King's second book was a collection of sermons published in 1963. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength to Love* (New York, Harper & Row, 1963).

other confines them within a separate culture of poverty.”¹¹⁸ Critiquing those who proposed blacks pull themselves up from their bootstraps, arguing that too many were “barefoot,” King proposed “a broad-based and gigantic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged” patterned after the G.I. Bill of Rights that emerged in the wake of WWII. He insisted that poor blacks deserved the same subsidized education and living expenses; low interest, no money down home loans; special preference in obtaining civil-service jobs; medical care; and above all, respect from the nation that had fostered “preferential employment of veterans in all walks of life.”¹¹⁹ King also mimicked Young’s Domestic Marshall Plan and its call for full employment, a living wage, and a guaranteed income—the cornerstones of the PPC’s agenda—and insisted upon better education and training programs and creative approaches for “neutralizing the perils of automation.”¹²⁰ While Young made the controversial call for “preferential treatment,” King, without explicitly naming it as such, basically called for reparations,¹²¹ declaring that a radical redistribution of wealth would have an immediate and transformative effect on the black population.¹²² While his writings primarily focused on the condition of poor blacks, King acknowledged

¹¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), viii-x.

¹¹⁸ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 8-9. While King employs the culture of poverty, he does so to describe the effects of racial discrimination, which keep poor blacks from accessing “normal education and normal social and economic opportunities.”

¹¹⁹ While the G.I. Bill should have helped thousands of black veterans, unbridled racism of white employers, real estate agents, and the Federal Housing Authority left many worse off than before the war. See King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 127.

¹²⁰ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 129.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 128. “The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law. Such measures would certainly be less expensive than any computation based on two centuries of unpaid wages and accumulated interest.”

¹²² King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 128. King declares, “I contend that the decline in school dropouts, family breakups, crime rates, illegitimacy, swollen relief rolls and other social evils would stagger the imagination.

that poor whites were in need and proposed that the civil rights movement should form coalitions with labor and the government, in particular with the new president.¹²³

King and Young were not the only activists to encourage fuller pursuit of the dual agenda after the 1963 March. In “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement, 1964” longtime socialist labor activist Bayard Rustin reported that black unemployment was greater in 1964 than a decade before and that the gap between white and black incomes was growing. He declared that the riots that erupted during the summer of 1963 were “not race riots; they were outbursts of class aggression in a society where class and color definitions are converging disastrously.”¹²⁴ Rustin complained that black youth lacked a register for success, proclaiming that,

. . . from the point of view of motivation, some of the healthiest Negro youngsters I know are juvenile delinquents. Vigorously pursuing the American dream of material acquisition and status, yet finding conventional means of attaining it blocked off, they do not yield to defeatism but resort to illegal (and often ingenious) methods.¹²⁵

Rustin critiqued those who condemned young black men and women’s choices in a country that fosters a belief in the sanctity of material goods and achieving success “by any means necessary,” insisting that “to want a Cadillac is not un-American; to push a cart in the garment center is.”¹²⁶ If young blacks were to be convinced that the

¹²³ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 142. King does not identify other minority groups, such as Mexican Americans and American Indians, as potential allies, but he suggests that eventually the civil rights movement will not only eradicate racism but that it also create a world-wide “vision of total interrelatedness.”

¹²⁴ Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement, 1964” in *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 118.

¹²⁵ Rustin, “From Protest to Politics,” 120.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

conventional paths to economic success through education and work were superior, the nation had to provide evidence that this was both true and possible for them.

Tom Kahn—a white Workers Defense League representative, long-time SCLC aid, director of the PPC’s white Appalachian participants, and Rustin’s assistant in organizing the March on Washington—concurred with both King and Rustin that the civil rights movement had to address economic inequality.¹²⁷ Kahn insisted that the movement begin pursuing a national agenda because of the rising frustrations in northern black communities and the increasing backlash in white communities across the nation. Like King, he provided statistics on employment, housing, and schools to demonstrate the severity of the problem and the widening gap between whites and blacks.¹²⁸ Kahn proposed three possible solutions and warned against relying on the private economy, as many economists influencing the direction of the burgeoning War on Poverty were to suggest. Mimicking both Young and King’s plans, Kahn proposed a three-tiered program that included massive education and training programs, creation of unskilled and semiskilled jobs, and direct financial relief. He admonished the movement for creating

¹²⁷ Tom Kahn, “Problems of the Negro Movement” *Dissent* (Winter 1964): 108-138, 110; Khan was much more critical of the movement’s past accomplishments, declaring that, “in not a single city has the civil rights movement scored a breakthrough victory.”

¹²⁸ Most economic gains were made from 1940 to 1953 with a large portion of the black workforce moving out of agriculture work into unskilled and semi-skilled work in the construction, mining, and manufacturing industries. Between 1953 and 1962, manufacturing lost 1.6 billion blue-collar jobs, while mining lost a whopping quarter of all jobs; construction jobs remained at the same level since 1957. Demographic shifts caused by changes in employment, largely the mass influx of southern workers into northern and western urban centers in search for industry work after the mechanization and automation of the agricultural industry led to increased racial segregation due to a combination of white flight and “urban renewal” programs, such as low-income housing projects that further isolated the poor. According to Kahn, of “the millions of housing units whose mortgages were insured by the Federal Housing Administration since 1934 and the Veterans Administration since 1944, less than 2% has been available to nonwhite families.” See Kahn, 119.

divisions within the black community and insisted that activists must address the entire community's needs, yet like most white liberals, he opposed compensation for past discrimination: "Preferential treatment, yes—but as A. Philip Randolph declares, preferential treatment for all the unemployed, the poor, the sick, the aged, disadvantaged youth—for the other America."¹²⁹ While civil rights activists like Young, King, Rustin, and Kahn debated the future of the movement, the mounting New Left student movement began to attack the issue of poverty head-on, forming an unlikely alliance with northern, urban, black mothers on welfare.

THE NEW LEFT & POVERTY PROTEST: ERAP

In 1963, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a group of largely northern, white college students who had participated in the civil rights movement in the South, began organizing poor blacks in the northern inner cities as part of their Economic Research Action Project (ERAP). Many of these white students were unprepared to deal effectively with the demands of the urban poor, but their attempts laid the groundwork for other anti-poverty activists. ERAP's ultimate goal was to build an interracial movement of the poor and extend democracy's reach in the United States.¹³⁰ The United Auto Workers gave ERAP \$5000 to organize jobless men, and SDS quickly established thirteen official ERAP projects, with the most successful projects emerging in Chicago, Newark, Boston, and Cleveland. Two of the more successful programs included JOIN—

¹²⁹ Kahn, 131.

¹³⁰ Jennifer Frost, *"An Interracial Movement of the Poor": Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 1.

Jobs or Income Now—and GROIN—Garbage Removal or Income Now,¹³¹ which demanded full employment or a guaranteed income for all groups—Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, blacks, and whites.¹³²

Civil rights activists increasingly debated the role sympathetic whites could and should play in the movement. SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael met with SDS leader Tom Hayden and advised SDS to organize poor whites, the core of the white backlash against civil rights. SDS entered the Near West Side of Cleveland where poor Southern Appalachians lived in squalor in “hillbilly heavens.” After talking with residents during a voter registration campaign, the ERAP activists identified three major problems to tackle: the mismanagement of public welfare, male unemployment, and public housing conditions. SDS activists helped local women revitalize an older local organization, the Citizens United for Adequate Welfare (CUFAW), which held successful rallies that eventually resulted in the city meeting their demands.¹³³ While SDS successfully organized some poor whites, most rejected ERAP’s interracial ideal. Historian Jennifer Frost explains that many whites were committed to their identity as white and working-class and decided to form their own organizations, such as the National Community Union (NCU).

¹³¹ See Frost 152 on ERAP programs and on minority groups. No mention was made of American Indians. For more on the successful UCC in Newark, see Komozi Woodard, *Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

¹³² Frost, 4.

¹³³ Andrew Kopkind, “Of, by, and for the Poor: The New Generation of Student Organizers,” in *The Triple Revolution: Social Problems in Depth*, ed. Robert Perrucci and Mark Pilisuk (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1968), 517.

While ERAP initially sought to organize jobless men, they quickly found that black mothers on welfare were more available, enthusiastic, and resourceful when it came to organizing local communities. Frost describes a mutual exchange between SDS activists and mothers on welfare in which SDS fostered community activism while the mothers challenged SDS members' assumptions. The young white leftists in SDS romanticized their relationship with the poor, as Hayden demonstrates, claiming that "students and poor people make each other feel real." Yet Frost insists that while this type of rhetoric revealed a degree of naiveté, SDS's identification with the poor also demonstrated young white activists' rejection of "the affluent society."

Like the Poor People's Campaign, most scholars and contemporaries deemed ERAP a failure, but by what standards? Frost concludes that many New Left activists encountered the same problems SCLC faced—they lacked the patience and persistence to pursue the long and uneventful process of enabling people to develop community power on a locally sustained grassroots basis. She suggests that even if ERAP had developed a larger and stronger campaign that it was destined for failure:

The Clark Bill (designed to implement the Full Employment Act of 1946) and later full employment legislation languished in Congress during the 1960s. Institutional reform did not even result in 1968 when SCLC's Poor People's Campaign demanded full employment and public jobs, the Kerner Commission made a similar recommendation after investigating the causes of black urban riots, and 79% of those polled by the Gallup favored the idea of the government guaranteeing a job to all Americans.¹³⁴

The successes and failures of social movements are obviously relative. While civil rights historians consistently deem the Poor People's Campaign a total failure, Frost recognizes the PPC as one of the most remarkable anti-poverty campaign of the era.

ERAP was considered a failure, yet it spurred other groups to pursue both economic and civil rights. Clayborne Carson argues that ERAP influenced SNCC's shift to economic issues.¹³⁵ At the first meeting of the National Coordinating Committee of Welfare Rights Groups, held in Chicago, August 6-7, 1966, twenty-six of the 140 delegates were representatives from ERAP community programs, many of whom became prominent members of NWRO.¹³⁶ Despite ERAP's lack of legislative successes, SDS helped spark a psychological transformation in its members and among the poor people they worked with, instilling a sense of self-confidence and forging political connections necessary for transforming their own lives. This emphasis on helping others help themselves would shape the direction of the government's first full assault against poverty that emerged as journalists, economists, social scientists, policy makers, and politicians discovered, defined, debated, and declared war on poverty.

THE WAR ON POVERTY'S DUELING AGENDAS

The 1968 Poor People's Campaign did not emerge out of a vacuum; it occurred four years after President Johnson declared an unconditional war on poverty and was part of a widespread popular interest in poverty during the 1960s. Experienced civil rights organizations, burgeoning welfare rights groups, ambitious academics, and policy makers all dueled to have their definitions of and solutions to poverty prioritized. The civil rights activism of the early 1960s helped push President Kennedy and, to an even greater degree, President Johnson towards a liberal domestic agenda that promoted equal

¹³⁴ Frost, 37, 174, 98.

¹³⁵ Carson, 176.

¹³⁶ Many other ERAP activists also joined and influenced other burgeoning movements, such as women's liberation and the black labor movement. See Kopkind, 517.

opportunity for all citizens. But why was a national, month-long display of poverty necessary in a country where the president himself had declared war against this social problem?

The genesis of the War on Poverty program occurred during the Kennedy Administration, but this president was not interested in pursuing a dual agenda. Kennedy had tried to ensure that the 1963 March on Washington was a moderate, interracial demonstration against racial discrimination organized in support of his pending civil rights legislation, not a protest for a guarantee that all Americans, regardless of race, have both a job and freedom. Economist Robert Lampman provided the Kennedy administration with statistics demonstrating the slowdown in economic growth between 1957 and 1962 and an increase in specific groups of the poor (the aged, female-headed families, and minorities).¹³⁷ After signing the tax cut of February 1963, Kennedy's advisers encouraged him to help those who fell below the lowest tax bracket. The New Economics—the Keynesian fiscal management theories, which Gareth Davies argues, “both reflected and encouraged a growing spirit of social activism,”¹³⁸—were a strong influence on the New Frontiersmen. But historians and poverty scholars debate what Kennedy's true motivations were. Some argued that Kennedy's act was one of genuine good will, while Piven and Cloward claimed Kennedy's poverty plan was a political act to subdue the growing frustrations of the inner cities.¹³⁹ Patterson challenges the notion

¹³⁷ While Harrington is attributed as the source of Kennedy's push for an assault on poverty, poverty scholar James Patterson argues that Lampman's statistics were a greater influence. See Patterson, 135.

¹³⁸ See Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 36.

¹³⁹ See Katz, 84-85 for a more thorough discussion of these debates.

that Kennedy saw poverty as a black issue, insisting that he initiated the poverty plan to help poor whites and to mediate the backlash rising against the civil rights movement with which he was identified.¹⁴⁰ Regardless of Kennedy's personal motivations, after the March on Washington and the urban rebellions of the mid-1960s policy makers, the press, and the public increasingly associated poverty with blackness.

Kennedy did not live to see his program take shape, but his successor embraced the poverty program as if it was his own. After being sworn in as president on November 22, 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson met the following day with Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, and instructed him to continue planning an antipoverty program, reportedly telling Heller, "that's my kind of program."¹⁴¹ Under Kennedy's administration Heller had initiated a plan to help a few groups and areas where poverty was most severe. Heller employed an individual rather than structural understanding of poverty and proposed self-help and access to opportunity rather than welfare programs. Gareth Davies argues that the War on Poverty was always conceptualized within the framework of individual opportunity through economic expansion, rehabilitation, and prevention programs rather than group rights and a radical redistribution of wealth.¹⁴² Kennedy's assassination forced Heller to adapt his vision so that it would fit with Johnson's style and rhetoric, transforming poverty from a regional issue into a national one.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Patterson, 134-135.

¹⁴¹ David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Montgomery: University of Alabama Press, 1986), ix.

¹⁴² See Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 86. See also Davies, 31.

¹⁴³ See O'Connor, 154-155; Davies, 31.

On January 8, 1964, Johnson declared in his state of the Union address an “unconditional war on poverty,” calling on Congress to enact the first major anti-poverty legislation since the Depression.¹⁴⁴ David Zarefsky argues that the war analogy helped get the program approved: “Not only did it reduce the burden of proof and isolate the opposition, but the war metaphor also sustained national interest and participation. It was an effective unifying device.” But the rhetoric of war also profoundly shaped the character of the War on Poverty; it made the program national in scope, centralized in command, and labeled those in opposition as traitors.¹⁴⁵ The war analogy was primarily a political move—a way to rally the nation together in the wake of Kennedy’s assassination and to reshape Johnson’s image from a southern conservative to a man of the people. Yet Zarefsky, Katz, and historian John A. Andrew III all agree that this rhetoric led to the program’s demise due to heightened expectations and abandonment of early goals. Just as the unanswered promises of freedom and equality from the civil rights movement had led to destructive outbursts in the nation’s impoverished inner cities, the heightened expectations resulting from the war rhetoric ensured that the program would seem like a failure.¹⁴⁶

From the earliest stages of the War on Poverty, there were many competing agendas. Several conferences occurred during the early months of 1964 at which a diverse group of journalists, policy makers, economists and businessmen met to debate

¹⁴⁴ PBS *America’s War on Poverty* Part 1 “In This Affluent Society” (Blackside, Inc., 1995).

¹⁴⁵ Zarefsky, 36.

¹⁴⁶ John A. Andrew III, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society* (Chicago: Ivan R, Dee Publishing, 1998), 88. See also Katz, 90.

poverty's causes and the best solutions to it.¹⁴⁷ While most agreed that the assault on poverty should be escalated, they differed in their interpretations of the causes, effects, and remedies for poverty. Government employees led by Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz demanded a large public works program, and HEW's Wilbur Cohen called for more welfare, solutions to automation, and enforcement of anti-discriminatory legislation,¹⁴⁸ but the economists and business leaders prevailed.¹⁴⁹ The majority followed Robert Lampman—one of the most influential members of the Council of Economic Advisers, and the primary architect of the early War on Poverty—who argued that economic productivity was the key solution to the poverty problem.

Yet more radical proposals were also introduced, some of which were embraced. Harrington's call for a mass political movement would be partially answered as Sargent Shriver introduced the concept of "maximum feasible participation" in February of 1964 after Johnson appointed the director of the Peace Corps to head the newly formed Office of Economic Opportunity. Shriver insisted that "the heart of the poverty program lies in a new form of dialogue between the poor and the rest of this society."¹⁵⁰ While Shriver's

¹⁴⁷ These included a conference titled "Poverty-in-Plenty: The Poor in Our Affluent Society" that took place on January 23, 1964, another seminar called *Productivity and Poverty*, held and the Ad Hoc Committee's conference on the Triple Revolution—the cybernation revolution, the weaponry revolution, and the human rights revolution—both of which occurred in March 1964. Conference proceedings published as *Poverty in Plenty*, Edited by George H. Dunne, S.J. (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1964) The participants included journalists like Michael Harrington and Dwight Macdonald who had helped expose the poverty problem; policy makers like Wilbur J. Cohen, Assistant Secretary of HEW since 1961; and leading economists like Robert Theobald of GE, Oscar Ornati of the New School, Leon H. Keyserling, President of the Conference on Economic Progress, and Gunnar Myrdal, director of The Institute for International Economic Studies in Stockholm, all of whom had shaped the debates on the New Economics, definitions of poverty, and potential solutions.

¹⁴⁸ Patterson, 136.

¹⁴⁹ *Poverty in Plenty*, 21.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

enthusiasm was admirable, policy makers, economists, academics, businessmen, and journalists—not poor people—dominated these conferences, as well as the vast majority of War on Poverty strategy sessions.¹⁵¹ The Ad Hoc Committee provided the most radical interpretations and solutions, arguing that poverty was the result of inequitable allocation of resources, emphasizing the growth in the military and space budgets at the expense of domestic programs, and suggested that poverty persists because certain groups profit from the poor.¹⁵² The Committee condemned Congress for ignoring the interconnectedness of the triple revolution—the cybernation revolution, the weaponry revolution, and the human rights revolution—and the paradox of growing poverty amidst unprecedented prosperity¹⁵³ and insisted that a guaranteed adequate income as a right, not a handout, and the only solution to poverty in the age of cybernation.¹⁵⁴ While many of these recommendations would be echoed in the demands put forth by the welfare rights movement and the PPC, the organizers of the War on Poverty took the more conservative approach based on the culture of poverty theory, arguing that changing poor people through education and training would eliminate poverty, not challenging the system.

These debates would continue for the next decade as an explosion of conferences, anthologies, and case studies emerged as a small and select group of primarily white

¹⁵¹ Even Johnson's first economic action as president—the Revenue Act of 1964, which provided an \$11.5 billion tax cut—was not focused on poor people who fell below the lowest tax bracket.

¹⁵² The Ad Hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution, "The Triple Revolution: An Appraisal of the Major U.S. Crises and Proposals for Action," in *Poverty in America*, 536-553.

¹⁵³ "The Triple Revolution," 542.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 547. In addition to calling for a guaranteed income, the Committee made several other key suggestions, such as expansion and revision of the education system, massive public works and low-cost housing initiatives, revision of the tax structure for more equitable distribution of wealth, and union and government efforts to help alleviate the effects of automation.

males hashed out what poverty was, what caused it, and how best to combat it.¹⁵⁵ In the process academics and policy makers not only expanded the role of social science, they turned public policy into a new field of study and dramatically expanded the amount of federal and private funds devoted to research on poverty.¹⁵⁶ One example is the foundation of the Institute for Research on Poverty, at the University of Wisconsin, a national center for the study of the nature and causes of poverty and effective means to combat it.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Published proceedings of conferences on poverty and poverty anthologies, 1965-1969: Burton A. Weisbrod, ed., *The Economics of Poverty: An American Paradox* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965); Louis A. Ferman, Joyce L. Kornbluh, and Alan Haber, ed., *Poverty in America: A Book of Readings* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965); Robert E. Will and Harold G. Vatter, ed., *Poverty in Affluence: The Social, Political, and Economic Dimensions of Poverty in the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1965); Frank G. Mitteback and Grace Marshall, "The Burden of Poverty," part of *Mexican-American Study Project, UCLA* (Regents of the University of California, 1966); Charles E., Higbie, ed., *Conference on Poverty Research, Communications, and the Public* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1966); Herman P. Miller, ed., *Poverty American Style* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1966); Harold L. Sheppard and Herbert E. Striner, *Civil Rights, Employment, and the Social Status of American Negroes* (Based on a Report for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights) (Kalamazoo, Michigan: The W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 1966); Don Benson, ed., *Dialogue on Poverty* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967); *Community Values and Conflict, 1967: A Conference Report*, 1967 National Conference on Community Values and Conflict, held May 3-5, 1967 at the Brotherhood-in-Action conference center in New York City; *Civil Rights in the Urban Crisis, Seminar on Manpower Policy and Program*, October 19, 1967, Washington, D.C; Arthur M. Ross and Herbert Hill, ed., *Employment, Race, and Poverty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1967); Robert Perrucci and Mark Pilisuk, *The Triple Revolution: Social Problems in Depth* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1968); Daniel P. Moynihan, *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives From the Social Sciences* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); James L. Sundquist, *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives From Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Kenneth S. Davis, ed., *The Paradox of Poverty in America, The Reference Shelf* Vol. 41 No. 2 (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1969).

¹⁵⁶ See Katz, 120-123 and O'Connor, 21.

¹⁵⁷ Some key works produced by the Institute for Research on Poverty include Robert J. Lampman, *Population Change and Poverty Reduction, 1947-1975* and *Ends and Means in the War Against Poverty*, (1966); Joseph D. Mooney, "Urban Poverty and Labor Force Participation" reprinted from *The American Economic Review*, Volume LVII, No. 1, (March 1967); Harold W. Watts, "An Economic Definition of Poverty," reprinted from *On Understanding Poverty*, ed. Daniel P. Moynihan (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Harold W. Guthries, "The Prospect of

Government officials, businessmen, and academics were not the only ones dueling over the causes of poverty and how it should be eradicated. The public was also sharply divided over the poor. A spring 1964 Gallup poll showed that 54% of those polled believed that poverty was the fault of the poor, while 46% believed it was due to factors beyond their control.¹⁵⁸ But the culture of poverty theory prevailed—either the conservative version that blamed poor people for their poverty and argued that government handouts would only perpetuate the vicious cycle, or the liberal version that insisted that poor people needed assistance to escape poverty.¹⁵⁹ In their analysis of whites' attitudes toward welfare recipients and the causes of poverty, social scientists Jon P. Alston and K. Imogene Dean reveal that while attitudes varied according to gender, age, and education level,¹⁶⁰ there was a direct correlation between those who blamed the poor for their poverty and those who felt the government was spending too much on social programs. A majority of white Americans, “78 percent of the total white

Equality of Incomes Between White and Black Families Under Varying Rates of Unemployment” Reprinted from *The Journal of Human Resources*, Volume V, No. 4 (Madison: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin, 1970).

¹⁵⁸ Zarefsky, 42.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Gladwin, *Poverty U.S.A.* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1967), 37. As Zarefsky explains, the “ultimate consequence of the vicious-circle image of poverty was to entrap OEO supporters in a destructive web of discourse. Opponents could call upon the very same image to justify abandoning the poverty program and reaffirming the older view that if a person was poor it was his or her own fault.” See Zarefsky, 93.

¹⁶⁰ Alston and Dean reported that, “Males were slightly more likely than females to blame poverty on a lack of effort . . . Younger respondents were most unsympathetic toward the poor, while those aged fifty and over were more likely to say that external circumstances were to blame for a person’s poverty . . . Unexpectedly, increased education was associated with increased intolerance toward the poor. Almost 40 percent of those who had finished high school or those who had gone to college replied that poverty is due to a lack of effort . . . The responses of the skilled and blue-collar workers were more liberal than professionals. It was the lower-status white-collar workers and the farmers who were most negative.” See Jon P. Alston and K. Imogene Dean, “Socioeconomic Factors Associated with Attitudes toward Welfare Recipients and the Causes of Poverty,” *Social Service Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (March 1972): 13-23.

population,” believed “‘most’ or ‘some’ of welfare recipients were illegitimately on the welfare rolls.”¹⁶¹ While the press focused on poor whites during the War on Poverty’s formative stages,¹⁶² blacks became more and more associated with poverty programs as critiques grew.

Few Americans knew of the trials and tribulations it took just to get on welfare, yet if more had understood how difficult getting aid really was, perhaps the numbers of people who believed the poor were “illegitimately on the welfare rolls” would drop. The reality was that the majority of the poor, particularly those in greatest need, were not on welfare, either because they were unaware of social services available to them, or because they were unwilling to suffer the treatment they received in welfare offices. Mary W. Wright in “Public Assistance in the Appalachian South” reveals how complicated, frustrating, time-consuming, and degrading seeking public assistance could be for the poor. Wright demands to know: “Which of us, I sometimes wonder, will know which counter to go to in Heaven, and after the first few questions, will we too be tempted to turn around and go out the door and try to catch us a ride back home—even if it is just a one-room shack buried in a dark ravine?”¹⁶³ Many poor white Appalachians rejected the poverty programs, proud of their self-reliance and unwilling to suffer the insults of the welfare officers. While Kennedy, had explicitly singled out poor whites in

¹⁶¹ Alston and Dean, 20.

¹⁶² For popular press accounts on Appalachians and the War on Poverty, see Francois, “West Virginia: The First Front,” *Reporter* (February 13, 1964): 34-35; “Poverty, U.S.A.,” *Newsweek*, Feb. 17, 1964, 19-38; John Domins, “The Valley of Poverty,” *Life* Oct. 9, 1964, 54-65.

¹⁶³ Mary W. Wright, “Public Assistance in the Appalachian South,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (November 1964): 406-409. For a contemporary take on how difficult it is to make use of U.S. social services, see *Gridlockd*, which chronicles two jazz musicians attempts to kick heroin with the help of government social services.

Appalachia for assistance, critical memory was short, and many claimed that poor whites had been neglected¹⁶⁴ or, more accurately, complained that the regional assistance programs were not sufficient to solve the poverty problem for southern whites.¹⁶⁵

While many Appalachians rejected the poverty programs, American Indians received more attention and assistance than perhaps ever before. With unemployment on reservations running as high as forty to fifty percent, seven or eight times the national average, and with nine out of ten Indian families living in poverty, the attention was warranted.¹⁶⁶ Despite such grim conditions, many were reluctant to accept help. As Melvin Thom expressed in his address at the American Indian Capital Conference on Poverty, held May 9-12, 1964:

“It is especially difficult for young people to say ‘We are poor—please help us’ . . . The image of the American Indian is that of always asking. But the Indian youth fears this poverty and we have got to take a good look at what approach we are going to use to be rid of poverty.”¹⁶⁷

American Indians were invited for the first time to propose plans for government-funded but self-run poverty programs on reservations. American Indian scholars suggest that this opportunity prompted Indians to increase their demands for similar rights funded by the BIA. Not only was the conference significant as an organizing session for inclusion in the War on Poverty, but it was also a unique opportunity for several hundred Indians and almost as many non-Indians to gather and discuss issues affecting the American Indian population and confront influential leaders, including Vice President Hubert

¹⁶⁴ Flynt, 118.

¹⁶⁵ Henry Caudill, “Appalachia: the Path from Disaster.”

¹⁶⁶ See “The War Against Poverty—The American Indian,” Address by Philleo Nash, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, at the Lincoln Centre, Chicago, February 12, 1964, 3.

Humphrey and Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall.¹⁶⁸ Such conferences and movements like the Poor People's Campaign fostered connections among different Indian groups that would provide a vital foundation for the budding American Indian Movement.

When Johnson first introduced his War on Poverty to Congress on March 16, 1964, the proposal included the creation of a Job Corps, training programs for unemployed youth and work-study programs for those in colleges and universities, Community Action Programs that included adult basic education programs and voluntary assistance programs for needy children, and a host of other social programs. After months of debate over the scope and strategy of the War on Poverty, President signed into law the Economic Opportunity Act on August 20, 1964, which provided no provisions for housing, job creation or welfare.¹⁶⁹ The Council of Economic Advisors, with Lampam at the helm, created a War on Poverty rooted in the culture of poverty theory, which thwarted some policymakers' attempts to encourage local grassroots leadership. The majority of the programs focused on putting people, primarily men, back to work through programs like Job Corps and training unskilled workers through Manpower and Training Programs, which were expanded in 1966, signaling an increased focus on urban rather than rural poverty, which contributed to a greater association of poverty with inner-city blacks rather than rural whites.¹⁷⁰ Other programs attempted to increase poor people's social opportunities through partnerships with the middle-class through programs like the

¹⁶⁷ See Alvin M. Josephy Jr., Jane Nagel, and Troy Johnson, ed., *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 144.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁶⁹ PBS *America's War on Poverty* Part 1 "In This Affluent Society" (Blackside, Inc., 1995).

Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA),¹⁷¹ Community Action Programs (CAP), Head Start, and Legal Services.

While many of these programs reflected the paternalistic attitudes of liberal whites,¹⁷² some were very effective. One of the most unique initiatives was the Community Action Programs, which did more to critique existing programs than to initiate new ones, but its designers lacked understanding of how local politics functioned and many had conflicting views of the CAPs purpose, some seeing it as a form of community empowerment, while others saw it as a tool of assimilation.¹⁷³ Jill Quadango argues that the civil rights movement absorbed community action programs, using them to redistribute political power from local machines to black organizations, which was a common critique of the program at the time and one reason why the CAPs were short-lived.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Zarefsky, 95.

¹⁷¹ PBS *America's War on Poverty* Part 4 "In Service to America" (Blackside, Inc., 1995). Elinor Constable, Supervisor for VISTA, explains that the goal was to "bring the middle-class and poor together in a partnership, to work with the poor not to do things to them or to do things for them, but to do things with them." VISTA volunteers repaired schools, sent out a national call for book donations, and served as teachers. In August 1966, VISTA volunteers accompanied 200 local residents to D.C. to raise awareness about problems in Appalachia: "People who had never left their home counties met face to face with their representatives."

¹⁷² See Tom Levin's critiques of Head Start in "The Child Development Group of Mississippi: A Report from a Hot Sector of the Quiet Front in the War on Poverty," in *The Triple Revolution*, 506-529, 506. Levin argues: "The war on poverty is being fought using the poor. It is not being fought by the poor. The poor largely remain pacifists. Some, though conscientious objectors, have been drafted by the iron-grip of hunger. They move like so many pawns on a chess-board, pushed and shoved from above without volition or creativity. Others, excluded from a poor-peoples army, stand by, neither assisting, nor in sympathy with their drafted neighbors. The magnificent concepts of a drive toward a great society leave them untouched and disinterested. The older poor compare the war on poverty with the WPA; the younger people talk about welfare and charity. The war on poverty has not sparked their imaginations because it is not their war."

¹⁷³ See Katz, 100-101 and O'Connor, 124 for more on these debates.

¹⁷⁴ Jill Quadango, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Others concur that the civil rights movement gave blacks,

Another program that received similar criticism was Head Start. Established in 1965 to provide poor children with adequate nutrition, health care, and educational advantages, Head Start began receiving criticisms when the media portrayed a Mississippi Head Start program, the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), as a front for civil rights activity. The media and government's focus on this group shifted perceptions of the War on Poverty as targeting blacks more than whites.¹⁷⁵ While Head Start was not intended to be a community action program, the CDGM was one of the most successful fronts on the War on Poverty and exemplified the principle of "maximum feasible participation." The group organized eighty-four centers in over fifty urban and rural impoverished communities throughout Mississippi designed and administered by local poor people.¹⁷⁶ As historian Charles Payne demonstrates, the move against CDGM and its virtual replacement with the more tightly controlled Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP) was a result of both class and racial discrimination. Payne explains that "OEO decided that there would have to be some 'respectable, responsible' people—i.e., not poor—in the governing structure," but that it was not just the class of the leadership that worried the government but "the possibility that millions of dollars

particularly in urban areas, "an organizational base which was lacking among whites who were poor. For these and other reasons, Negroes received from the antipoverty programs greater benefits than their proportion of the poor population would have indicated. Indeed, it was possible to view the early OEO as a potential institutional base for the second phase of the civil rights movement: the achievement of more effective economic participation in our society. In reality, however, OEO found itself caught between the civil rights militants and the white 'establishment.'" See Roger H. Davidson and Sar A. Levitan, *Antipoverty Housekeeping: The Administration of the Economic Opportunity Act* (Ann Arbor, Detroit: Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, 1968), 50. The Model Cities program, initiated in 1966, supplanted the CAPs and placed more power over funds and administration in the hands of local government rather than local people.

¹⁷⁵ PBS *America's War on Poverty* Part 2 "Given a Chance" (Blackside, Inc., 1995).

¹⁷⁶ Levin, 507.

might go to what was thought of as a SNCC-COFO project.”¹⁷⁷ Most Americans opposed funding organizations that publicly advocated for racial and economic rights.

Compared to the CDGM, the equally radical and extremely successful Legal Services program received very little criticism. This division of the War on Poverty helped poor people challenge unjust welfare practices after its establishment in 1966. The lawyers worked closely with migrant workers in California in association with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, received very little criticism compared to the CDGM.¹⁷⁸ As poverty came to be more closely associated with blackness and with the civil rights movement, the public’s attitudes toward anti-poverty programs worsened.

Some of the poverty programs were effective, but the War on Poverty was (and continues to be) criticized from all sides. Conservatives complained that the government was wasting money on people who didn’t deserve assistance, while liberals like Harrington complained that the programs were inadequate and under-funded.¹⁷⁹ Social workers grumbled that the government had pushed them out of their place. The poor were frustrated with inadequate and misguided programs that failed to meet their needs

¹⁷⁷ For a full account of the CDGM controversy see Payne, 342-348, for a detailed discussion of CDGM, particularly in Greenwood, Mississippi, and PBS *America’s War on Poverty* Part 2 “Given a Chance” (Blackside, Inc., 1995)

¹⁷⁸ See Davidson and Levitan, 51: “In local communities, the ferment of the civil rights movement sometimes generated problems for OEO’s relations with other outside interests. For instance, a minor controversy arose when it was discovered that a multi-million dollar HARYOU-Act program was subsidizing a theater program known as the “Black Arts Theatre”—which was using some of the funds to stage some anti-white plays by Negro dramatist LeRoi Jones. The plays were offensive to many citizens [read white], and Shriver himself referred to them as ‘vicious racism’ . . . A similar flurry of criticism arose in the summer of 1967 when it was discovered that one of the items proposed in the summer package of a delegate agency of the Nashville, Tennessee, CAA called for a “Liberation School.” While it is true that the government might be weary of any federally funded project connected with what were increasingly seen as radical activists organizations, race seems to be a key factor.

and government officials who promised “maximum feasible participation,” but rarely involved poor people in planning and administering programs to help them. Civil rights groups with experience pursuing the dual agenda had more detailed and specific complaints. They rejected earmarked funds and called for local participation in CAPs, larger appropriations for antipoverty programs, an increase in job-creation programs, and most importantly, federal control over welfare programs due to the incredible abuse of the system throughout the South.¹⁸⁰

While abuses occurred in small towns and cities throughout the South, migratory poor people suffered the most. Whether circling the cities in search for work or traveling across the nation to harvest the next crop, migrants were largely excluded from federal aid due to residency laws, which existed in all but two states, the liberal Connecticut and the remote Hawaii.¹⁸¹ Michael Katz critiques the programs being under-funded and unambitious, largely due to the escalation of the Vietnam War, but suggest that the War on Poverty’s greatest failures were its inability to challenge the dysfunctional welfare state and its reinforcement of the distinction between social insurance and public assistance.¹⁸² Cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich and economist William Julius Wilson attribute the War on Poverty’s failure to the fact that it was rooted in the culture of poverty theory that

¹⁷⁹ For Harrington’s immediate reactions, see Michael Harrington, “Close-Up on Poverty” *Look* (August 25, 1964): 63-70.

¹⁸⁰ Bayard Rustin recounts how, “In Indianola, Miss., for example, the chief of police is head of the antipoverty board; in Selma, Ala., Jim Clark controls much of the funds.” See Bayard Rustin, “Why Don’t Negroes . . .” in *Rainwater and Yancey*, 417.

¹⁸¹ See Barbara Carter, “The Jalopy Nomads,” *The Reporter* (May 7, 1964): 31-33, reprinted in *Poverty in Affluence*, 107-111 and Jones, 186.

¹⁸² Katz, 112.

distrusted the will and ability of poor people to help themselves, resulting in inadequate and ill-suited programs.¹⁸³

In addition to a consistent lack of funding and poorly conceived programs, public support for War on Poverty programs dwindled. As part of a growing backlash against the civil rights movement, many white Americans considered government aid for adequate housing, education, and jobs as government handouts based on racial preference rather than the rights of all citizens.¹⁸⁴ The conflation of civil rights and poverty, or more accurately, blacks and poverty, led to a backlash against both the War on Poverty programs and the welfare system as a whole. The National Confederation of American Ethnic Groups charged the OEO with being “pro-black and anti-poor white.”¹⁸⁵ Growing fears over rising AFDC rolls and misuse of the system led Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia to issue a report suggesting that sixty percent of his state’s recipients were ineligible under the law.¹⁸⁶

Attitudes towards the poor, particularly those on welfare, hardened as the poverty programs grew. A 1964 Gallup Poll revealed that attitudes towards the poor were sharply divided along political lines with more Republicans attributing poverty to a lack of effort,

¹⁸³ See William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chapter six in particular, and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989): 46. For a more detailed economic analysis of the War on Poverty’s successes and failures a decade later, see studies sponsored by the University of Wisconsin’s Institute for Research on Poverty: Robert D. Plotnick and Felicity Skidmore, *Progress Against Poverty: A Review of the 1964-1974 Decade* (New York: Academic Press, 1975) and *A Decade of Federal Antipoverty Programs: Achievements, Failures, and Lessons*, ed. Robert H. Haveman, (New York: Academic Press, 1977).

¹⁸⁴ Andrew, 49.

¹⁸⁵ Hamilton and Hamilton, 162.

¹⁸⁶ Patterson, 107.

while more Democrats cited circumstances as the cause.¹⁸⁷ Yet as James Patterson reveals, the labels used to describe assistance drastically affected the public's attitudes. A poll taken in October 1964 suggested that 68% of Americans wanted their government to ensure that no citizen went without food or shelter, yet at the same time 64% of those polled argued that welfare led to idleness.¹⁸⁸ Another poll in January 1965 discovered a whole range of unfavorable attitudes toward welfare recipients, including extremely harsh attitudes towards single mothers, reporting that half believed unwed mothers who had further illegitimate children should be denied relief, while a whopping twenty percent favored sterilization.¹⁸⁹

The press, government advisors, and even the president did a great deal to transform the public's image of poverty from that of poor rural whites to the single, black, welfare mother. While this transformation was rooted in the popular belief that poor people's behavior and value systems were the root causes of their poverty, black mothers on welfare challenged the culture of poverty theory by joining forces to create the first national welfare rights organization. When women from the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) joined forces with the interracial coalition of the Poor People's Campaign and marched and camped on Washington, Daniel Patrick Moynihan suggested that when "the battalions (or whatever) of the Poor People's March began to

¹⁸⁷ George Gallup, "Two Basically Different Views Held on Causes of Poverty," *Gallup Poll Report* (Spring, 1964), reprinted in *Poverty in Affluence*, 69-70.

¹⁸⁸ Patterson, 110.

¹⁸⁹ "The poll showed that 84 percent wanted (11 percent opposed) to require able-bodied people on relief to take 'any job offered which pays the going wage'; 73 percent favored (19 percent opposed) giving welfare clients food and clothing instead of cash; 58 percent approved (30 percent opposed) of sixty-day residence requirements; and 69 percent (22 percent opposed) said

arrive” that they “seemed unaware that either the Office or its director existed.”¹⁹⁰ Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The poor people who participated in the PPC not only knew the Office existed, they dedicated a month and a half of their lives to protest the under-funded, poorly administered, and ill-conceived programs, to which Moynihan himself contributed by popularizing the most vicious stereotype to emerge from the culture of poverty theory—the pathological, black, matriarchal, single-parent family.

THE MOYNIHAN REPORT, THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY, AND THE RISE OF THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Several forces converged in the mid-1960s that transformed American conceptions of poverty from the image of the strong and noble poor whites of the Depression best represented by Dorthea Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” to the damaging and persistent stereotype of the single, black “welfare queen” exploiting an overly generous and corrupt welfare system. As conditions in the inner cities worsened and civil rights promises went unanswered, despite federal legislation, racial tensions flared across the nation’s urban centers. As activists began to focus their attention on urban problems, inner city residents became more militant. Activists in Philadelphia and Boston protested urban renewal programs, commonly referred to as “negro removal programs” by picketing at construction sites, and in Harlem a series of rent strikes were followed by the first large-scale riot/rebellion of the decade.¹⁹¹ Michael Katz argues that from that point

that people who migrated in order to get relief ‘should be required to prove they came to the area because they had a definite job offer.’” See Patterson, 109.

¹⁹⁰ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 5.

¹⁹¹ Stanley Aronowitz, “Poverty, Politics, and Community Organization” *Studies on the Left* (Summer 1964).

on, “the fusion of race, poverty, and cities became the tacitly accepted starting point among radicals, liberals, and conservatives for debates about policy and reform.”¹⁹²

Unlike his predecessor who tried to dodge racial issues, Johnson tackled the growing conflation of poverty and blackness head on. On June 4, 1965 he delivered a powerful speech at Howard University, marking the first time a U.S. president addressed the historical and present connections between racial discrimination and poverty among black Americans.¹⁹³ Gareth Davies recognizes the speech as signaling a dramatic shift in liberal philosophy by going against Johnson’s economic advisers and recognizing poverty not as an individual problem, but as a group problem rooted in both past and present discrimination.¹⁹⁴ Using rhetoric that in some ways mimicked Whitney Young and King’s calls for retributive treatment, Johnson declared:

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘You are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.¹⁹⁵

A skilled political speaker, Johnson was capable of invoking the language of the rising Black Nationalist movement while referring to the culture of poverty, remarking on how blacks were a part of “another nation” and lived in a “city within a city.”¹⁹⁶ While

¹⁹² Katz, 23.

¹⁹³ Hamilton and Hamilton, 135.

¹⁹⁴ Davies, 74.

¹⁹⁵ “Remarks of the President at Howard University, June 4, 1965,” reprinted in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1967), 126.

¹⁹⁶ While Johnson demonstrated his commitment to a dual agenda of civil and economic rights, Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey recognize the damaging effect of Johnson’s co-optation of the movement, deeming it a “manifestation of the ‘benign Machiavellianism’” and insisting that by “embracing the movement figuratively (and its leaders physically), the President maximized his own options in action and minimized theirs.” See Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1967), 16.

making a case for special assistance for blacks, Johnson's rhetoric had essentialist and even racist undertones, declaring that, "Negro poverty is not white poverty. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences—deep, corrosive, obstinate differences—radiating painful roots into the community, the family, and the nature of the individual."¹⁹⁷ Heavily influenced by the still unpublished Moynihan Report, Johnson's language reflected the culture of poverty's racial implications of being separate and apart and even inherently different—"the Other." Despite the contradictory nature of Johnson's speech, he believed it was the government's responsibility "to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together."¹⁹⁸ Johnson concluded the speech by announcing his plans to call a conference, "To Fulfill These Rights" a play on Truman's civil rights committee, "To Secure These Rights."

While the conference would not take place for almost six months, the summer of 1965 was an extremely active year on both the civil rights and poverty fronts. During the final week in July Johnson decided to escalate the U.S. response in Vietnam by committing 50,000 additional troops,¹⁹⁹ and tensions soared in Alabama as activists confronted the National Guard during the Selma voting rights marches. The image of Alabama National Guardsmen tear-gassing nonviolent protesters had all but ensured swift passage of the Voting Rights Act, which promised improved political representation, while Congress passed several historical pieces of legislation to help fight poverty, including the creation of social health care through Medicare for the elderly and

¹⁹⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks of the President at Howard University."

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Medicaid for the poor, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, passed in April of 1965, which initiated a Robin Hood-style program that distributed excess funds to poorer schools.²⁰⁰ In addition to poverty programs, welfare access increased with the expansion of AFDC and the Food Stamps program, the latter of which Richard P. Nathan, former Deputy Under-Secretary of HEW, argues was the most significant transformation in the welfare system since the 1935 Social Security Act.²⁰¹ Yet, as interviews and archival data on participants of the Poor People's Campaign reveal, the poorest of the poor rarely received any form of relief from the government.²⁰²

Many blacks, frustrated with deteriorating conditions and fed up with empty promises, took to the streets in protest in what some would label conscious, collective rebellions, while others deemed them irrational riots. Before Johnson was able to hold his conference to determine how to solve the interrelated problems of racial and economic inequality, another major riot/rebellion broke out, this time on the West Coast in Watts, California. Violence ensued on August 11, 1965 in response to the arrest of young black man and ended days later with thirty-four people dead, more than 1,000 injured, and property damage amounting to \$40 million. Gareth Davies argues that the effect of the Watts riot was much broader than the calculated loss of life and property: "At a stroke, the context for domestic policymaking had been transformed in a way that discredited the Great Society's ideology and seriously undermined its electoral

¹⁹⁹ Davies, 77.

²⁰⁰ Hamilton and Hamilton, 155.

²⁰¹ Maruice MacDonald, "Food Stamps: An Analytical History," *Social Service Review* (December 1977): 642-657, 642.

coalition.”²⁰³ By the time the White House Committee finally convened on November 17, 1965, Johnson had retreated from the dual agenda and escalated the Vietnam War.²⁰⁴ Those on the right insisted the riot proved that the poor did not deserve any help, while those on the left argued that the rebellion was a communal cry for help. While residents insisted that the rebellion began as a response to police brutality, specifically, and to substandard living conditions and a lack of job opportunities more generally, politicians and journalists increasingly attributed the riots to a breakdown of the black family structure. Chicano historians note that while most Mexican Americans were opposed to the primarily black rebellion, others saw it as an opportunity to display unity with blacks in a common defense against police brutality and economic inequality.²⁰⁵ While both Chicano and black families were criticized for having too many children, female-headed black households received the harshest critique of all.

²⁰² See Registration forms, King Library and Archives, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Files, Box 180, Folders 21-22; Box 181, Folders 1-4 (hereafter cited as KL, SCLC, 180:21). For a more thorough discussion of the statistics these forms provided, see chapter four.

²⁰³ Davies, 78.

²⁰⁴ Rainwater and Yancey argue Johnson used the Moynihan controversy as his excuse for doing so, rather than the budgetary restraints caused by the escalating cost of the Vietnam War, or increased racial tension post-Watts. Davies argues that the conference was not, as Rainwater and Yancey suggest, Johnson abandoning the promises of the Great Society, but instead, the conference represented an assault on the politics of the Great Society and signaled an abandonment of “opportunity-based liberalism” in exchange for “a philosophy of entitlement.” Davies identifies three themes that exhibit this shift in liberalism: 1) claims that family structure should not have to conform to white, middle-class norms; 2) arguments that liberal values were an impediment to social and racial justice—individualistic explanations for social problems and moralistic solutions rather than systemic change; 3) rights of disadvantaged groups are unconditional; Noteworthy was “the extent to which the rights-orientation of the discussions persisted, even when the rhetoric of race disappeared.” See Rainwater and Yancey, 4-5; Davies, 96-97.

²⁰⁵ The same year Cesar Chavez began his famous grape strike in Delano, California and united Mexican and Filipino farm workers who faced opposition from both employers and the government. See Martinez and Rivas, 59.

While stereotypes about black family structure, sexual mores, marital status, and reproductive habits have abounded since slavery, during the mid-to-late 1960s the media transformed the image of poverty from white to black. Even a brief sample of *Time* magazine reveals the increasing recognition of the dual agenda and conflation of poverty with blackness. In “How the Poor Became Black: The Racialization of American Poverty in the Mass Media,” Martin Gilens demonstrates the incredibly disproportionate focus on black poverty in the media compared with actual percentages of black people living in poverty, as well as a tendency for pictures of poor whites to accompany more positive stories, while pictures of blacks predominated during backlashes against welfare and in stories presenting a negative view of the poor.

The overwhelmingly negative press accounts of the PPC support this argument. While the media demonized black families and black mothers, no one individual is more responsible for promoting the stereotype of the single, black welfare mother as a social pariah, caught in a “tangle of pathology” than Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Yet Moynihan was not alone in his focus on the family structure of poor families and how the culture of poverty affected their reproductive habits. An article produced by the National Academy of Sciences titled “Reduce Flow of Unwanted Babies,” demonstrated a direct correlation between the level of education and the number of children one had, showed that the majority of large families were located in the rural South, and suggested that the number of children had a profound effect on the impoverished family’s chances of breaking out of a cycle of poverty.²⁰⁶ While the title is dramatic, the article presented

²⁰⁶ “Reduce Flow of Unwanted Babies,” in *The Growth of the U.S. Population* (National Academy of Sciences: National Research Council, 1965), 9-13.

data with an objective, detached tone, unlike Moynihan's "Report," which was full of provocative language, manipulated and sloppy research data, and a lack of specific policy proposals.

Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor in charge of the Office of Policy Planning and Research, completed *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* in March 1965 with assistance from two of his staff, Paul Barton and Ellen Broderick.²⁰⁷ Moynihan argued that the black family structure was collapsing due to steady increases in single-parent households, out-of-wedlock births, teen pregnancies, school dropouts, and rising AFDC rolls. Moynihan acknowledged that unemployment among black men as a key contributor to these changes in family structure, but this important admission was often omitted from media summaries of the report. The Senator characterized the black family as caught in a pathological cycle and suggested that existing social programs to aid the black poor could not reach these families.²⁰⁸ While he cited the work of leading black scholars, such as E. Franklin Frazier, Bayard Rustin, Kenneth Clark, Whitney Young, and Dorothy Height, he did so selectively, and without a deep understanding of

²⁰⁷ Rainwater and Yancey explain that Moynihan was part of "a new breed of public servants, the social scientist-politicos, who combine in their background both social science training and experience and full-time involvement in political activity" and that his views were "strongly influenced by Catholic welfare philosophy, which has emphasized the idea that family interests are the central objective of social welfare and of social policy in general." See Rainwater and Yancey, 4, 17, 18, 20.

²⁰⁸ Blacks were not the only group to have their families labeled as pathological. In "The Social Science Myth of the Mexican American Family" Miguel Montiel exposes the specific misconceptions social scientists have popularized regarding their family dynamics: "First and foremost is the concept social scientists have regarding *machismo*, as supposedly *the* underlying cause of Mexican and Mexican American problems. Secondly, it follows that this formulation is inherently incapable of defining normal behavior and thus automatically labels all Mexican and Mexican American people as sick—*only in degree of sickness do they vary*." See Miguel Montiel, "The Social Science Myth of the Mexican American Family," *Voices: Readings from El*

these scholars' arguments and research. He argued that the roots of the problem dated back to slavery:

Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American. At this point, the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world. The cycle can be broken only if these distortions are set right.²⁰⁹

Moynihan then called on the nation to enact a massive program to help the black family out of its "tangle of pathology" but provided no specific recommendations of how to do so.

Critiques emerged immediately from all angles. The Labor Department criticized Moynihan's use of data, citing a lack of comparisons between black and white

Grito, A Journal of Contemporary Mexican American Thought, 1967-1973 (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, Inc., 1971), 57-63.

²⁰⁹ Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Govt. Print. Off. 1965), 47; See Herbert Gans, *The War Against the Poor: the Underclass and Antipoverty Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed*; Heather L. Ross and Isabel V. Sawhill, *Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1975); and Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 28-31 for challenges to the pathology of the black family and to Moynihan's claim that the matriarchal black family was a legacy of slavery. Carol Stack's ethnographic study of welfare families demonstrated that many black families had an extensive network of kin relations and redefined the family as "the smallest, organized durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily, providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival." Heather L. Ross and Isabel V. Sawhill demonstrate that the growth in families headed by women was part of a larger historical shift from the "distributive family of the 19th and early 20th centuries, in which a man working outside of the home provided resources for financially dependent women and children, and a form adapted to the less specialized marital roles we seem to moving toward, in which both husbands and wives will share more equally in the physical care and financial support of their children." They argue that the appropriate attitudes towards redefined sex roles and the supporting institutions and community services have yet to develop to support these changing family structures and call for public policy that is self-conscious about the effects it will have on families and family structure (critique of man in the house laws and other family-damaging aspects of the welfare system) and for intentionally neutral policy in terms of family structure.

families.²¹⁰ The report gained a poor reputation through informal communication networks and solicited critiques from academia and was criticized as being “oversimplified” and too alarmist. But the most severe critiques came from blacks who found Moynihan’s rhetoric both racist and paternalistic. Many challenged Moynihan’s tendency to cast white, middle-class normativity as the standard to which everyone must strive. Feminists also attacked Moynihan and charged that the report was incredibly sexist—casting female-led households not only as economically harmful in a male-dominated society, but as pathological.²¹¹ The controversy escalated in early November when, under the leadership of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches and the Office of Church and Race of the Protestant Council of New York city, sixty representatives of New York churches and civil rights organizations met to adopt a resolution urging the President to remove family structure from the list of topics for the upcoming White House Planning Conference.²¹²

Civil rights organizations not only found the content of the report offensive, they also resented the claim that these problems or their causes were new, arguing that it took the complaints of a white senator for these issues to be taken seriously, relying on the research of black scholars who had warned of the severity of these conditions and their

²¹⁰ Moynihan’s misuse of statistics “most egregiously and misleadingly reinforced the popular stereotype that all welfare families were black, by applying data on both white and black welfare families to just African Americans. There has also been much critical scrutiny of the report’s central statistical claim that an autonomous culture of welfare dependency was indicated by the fact that welfare caseloads were beginning to rise independently of changes in the black male unemployment rate, but civil servants below Moynihan had a hard time critiquing the report due to his bureaucratic dominance. See Katz, 44-52; Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 119-123.

²¹¹ Moynihan’s argument reflects the perspective of some turn-of-the-century racists who argued that signs of a matriarchal culture indicated a less advanced stage of civilization.

²¹² Rainwater and Yancey, 4-5.

consequences a generation before.²¹³ Michael Katz argues that civil rights leaders' opposition to the report stemmed more from embarrassment over the salacious focus on sexual habits than from challenges to their ideology, but many civil rights activists provided a gamut of criticisms. SNCC's National Chariman John Lewis' claimed the report "takes too much for granted" and was based on the assumption that discrimination and racism no longer exist, while Floyd McKissick, national chairman of CORE, critiqued Moynihan for proposing that "everyone should have a family structure like his own" rather than challenging a system that fostered poverty and inequality. Bayard Rustin argued that the report was "incomplete" because it gave the impression that the black family Moynihan identified was the rule instead of its exception and concurred with McKissick that, "what may seem to be a disease to the white middle class may be a healthy adaptation to the Negro lower class." Robert Carter of the NAACP proposed that rather than focusing on the pathology of the black family, policy makers should focus first on the "social pathology of discrimination" and to recognize that all families were weakening due to the effects of an industrialized society facing deindustrialization.²¹⁴ King weighed in on the report in a speech delivered in Westchester County, NY on October 29, 1965, but provided a rather weak and reserved response, especially when compared to CORE's leader, James Farmer, who went on a tirade in defense of the African Americans:

"As if living in the sewer, learning in the streets and working in the pantry weren't enough of a burden for millions of American Negroes, I now learn that we've caught 'matriarchy,' and the 'tangle of pathology' . . . By laying the primary blame for present-day inequalities on the pathological conditions of the

²¹³ Hamilton and Hamilton, 139.

²¹⁴ See Rainwater and Yancey, 200-201.

Negro family and community, Moynihan has provided a massive academic cop-out for the white conscience and clearly implied that Negroes in this nation will never secure a substantial measure of freedom until we learn to behave ourselves and stop buying Cadillacs instead of bread . . . It has been the fatal error of American society for 300 years to ultimately blame the roots of poverty and violence in the Negro community upon Negroes themselves.”²¹⁵

While Farmer’s verbal assault provided a clear assessment of the report from many African Americans, the greatest challenge to Moynihan’s claims and the culture of poverty as a whole was the burgeoning welfare rights movement, led by supposedly “pathological” single black mothers on welfare.

The Moynihan Report was highly flawed, but it did expose an important trend that the welfare rights movement would demonstrate more fully—the feminization of poverty. Feminist scholar Joan Smith argues that there were two factors that led to the feminization of poverty, the first being the increased number of female-headed households, and the second the type of work women performed, primarily part-time service jobs that paid low wages and provided fewer benefits.²¹⁶ Douglas Glasgow of the National Urban League points to weaknesses in the feminization of poverty literature, arguing that it overstated the extent of poverty among black women, demonstrating that between “1959 and 1985, poverty among black women declined from 71 percent to 54 percent.”²¹⁷ But as Benetta B. Washington explains, it was not just minority women who

²¹⁵ Rainwater and Yancey, 408-410.

²¹⁶ See Joan Smith, “The Paradox of Women’s Poverty: Wage-earning Women and Economic Transformation,” in Gelpi et al, *Women and Poverty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

²¹⁷ See Douglas Glasgow, “The Black Underclass in Perspective,” in National Urban League, *The State of Black America 1987* (Washington, D.C.: National Urban League, 1987).

represented the feminization of poverty, demonstrating that in every group at every stage of life “poor women are the poorest of the poor.”²¹⁸

While scholars demonstrated the roots of the feminization of poverty, Mark Battle, deputy director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and cultural anthropologist Jeanne Barnett challenged Moynihan’s claim that female-dominated homes were pathological, arguing that women-headed households since slavery had produced more job and educational opportunities for black women and encouraged young black girls to achieve their full potential. Scholars also challenged the reasons for an increase in out of wedlock pregnancies, suggesting that rather than a lack of information about contraception, many chose to embrace the status and rewards of motherhood while forgoing marriage due to a lack of desirable mates.²¹⁹ The PPC would echo these trends since approximately half of the participants were single women in their twenties and thirties with children, while the other half were primarily single, teenage boys.

King’s involvement in poverty campaigns, while disparaged, is typically included in the history of the civil rights movement, particularly his participation in the Chicago Freedom Movement and in the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike that occurred before King’s assassination, but welfare rights campaigns typically have been left out of this history. Some scholars have made false dichotomies between civil and economic rights,

²¹⁸ Benetta B. Washington, “Women in Poverty” *American Child* Vol. 47, No. 3 (May 1965): 4; Mary Dublin Keyesling, “Trends in Women’s Employment,” *American Child* Vol. 47, No. 3 (May 1965). See statistics presented in chapter one on different minority groups’ women’s income compared with male counterparts.

²¹⁹ Mark Battle and Jeanne Barnett, “The Negro Matriarchy,” *American Child* Vol. 47, No. 3 (May 1965): 9-10; For an account on how social scientists and policy makers’ assumptions concerning black girls shape their life chances, see Margaret B. Young, “The Negro Girl and Poverty,” *American Child* Vol. 47, No. 3 (May 1965).

rural and urban movements, southern and northern racial attitudes, and the benevolent non-violent stage of the civil rights movement contrasted with the destructive Black Power phase of the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. Recognizing how blacks and other minorities pursued dual and sometimes multiple agendas demonstrates the constructed and inaccurate nature of these dichotomies.

THE BIRTH OF NWRO AND THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Between 1963 and 1966, several welfare rights groups emerged, including ANC Mothers Anonymous in Los Angeles, California; the Committee of Needy Families, on the Lower Eastside, New York City; the Welfare Rights Organization (WRO), in Oakland California; the Welfare Recipients League in Brooklyn, New York, and various other groups in Baltimore, Boston, and Ohio. In early February of 1966, Richard A. Cloward and Richard M. Elam published an article in *The Nation*, “The First Congress of the Poor, which reported on a “hastily arranged” national convention attended by approximately 300 “bona fide poor people” and “100 representatives of the poor” held at a black Elks’ club in Syracuse, New York on January 15 and 16, 1966. The group’s purpose was to protest the inadequacies of the War on Poverty and call for “total participation of the poor,” in local anti-poverty councils. The delegates established an independently funded, nation-wide organization to pursue their claims, the National People’s War Council Against Poverty, calling for unity among grassroots organizers. The press largely ignored their efforts and none of the many government officials or civil rights activists attended, with the exception of George Wiley of CORE. He met academic activists Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven and was introduced to their “Strategy to

End Poverty.” Meanwhile poor people’s activism challenged the central tenets of the culture of poverty theory that argued that poor people were despondent and too present-minded.

The group was mostly from the nearby inner cities of New York, Buffalo, Newark, Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, but a contingent of striking grape workers from Delano, California, a group of Arizona cotton pickers, and individuals from other depressed regions across the U.S. made their way in organizers’ cars or in chartered buses and slept on the floors of the local poor once they arrived, demonstrating an important precursor to the PPC caravans. While Cloward and Elam praised the Council as an important first step, they argued that the poor must strive for their goal of creating a national movement that linked the urban and rural poor, and one that attacks the public welfare system as a whole.²²⁰ The dual agenda was expanding yet again with an organization attempting to pursue two dual agendas—to tackle both economic and civil rights, and gender rights to a lesser degree, and to create a movement that responded to both urban and regional poverty. The Poor People’s Campaign would build on the NWRO’s precedent by forming a movement that was multiracial and economic, and both national and regionally representative.

George Wiley established the Poverty/Rights Action Center (P/RAC) to serve as an institutional base for the burgeoning movement. The Center enabled the group to make plans to support a proposed Ohio Walk for Adequate Welfare. June 30, 1966 is

²²⁰ Richard A. Cloward and Richard M. Elam, “The First Congress of the Poor,” *The Nation*, February 7, 1966, 148-151. In the same issue, James P. Degan writes about the “Monopoly in the Vineyards: The ‘Grapes of Wrath’ Strike” of grape pickers led by Cesar Chavez in Delano, California, signaling a greater recognition of other minority groups and their protest movements.

known as the birthday of the Welfare Rights movement as over 5,000 welfare recipients and their supporters marched from Cleveland to Columbus, Ohio to protest cutbacks in benefits and demand better treatment from welfare agencies.²²¹ Welfare rights activists gathered again from August 6-7, 1966 in Chicago, formed the National Coordinating Committee of the Welfare Rights Movement, and adopted goals based on the participation of representatives from eleven states. The central tenets of the budding organization's platform included the demand for a guaranteed job or income, which would become the PPC's central demand. While the majority of activists were women, primarily women of color, they demanded not only incomes for themselves so that they could stay home and perform the undervalued job of raising their children, but an income for all U.S. citizens, regardless of their parental or marital status.²²²

During the spring and summer of 1967, the organization escalated its efforts in soliciting members, culminating on June 30, 1967, when NWRO chapters staged protests in over forty cities as the first nationally coordinated effort of the welfare rights movement. The group convened again from August 25-27, 1967 in Washington, DC to found a permanent, nationally coordinated welfare rights movement, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Over a hundred delegates from sixty-seven local WROs attended representing twenty-two states and a total of 4,000 members. The newly-established organization celebrated its birth with a Mothers March on Washington on the fourth anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August

²²¹ Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

²²² Felicia Kornbluh, "Welfare Rights, Consumerism, and Northern Protest," 200. See also *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of

28, 1967, at which 1,400 demonstrators protested H.R. 12080, a piece of anti-welfare legislation, and weeks later took their complaints directly to the seat of government, testifying before the Senate Finance Committee on September 19, 1967 to educate the Congress about poverty.

While NWRO formed alliances with many different activist organizations, Jennifer Mittelstadt argues that NWRO's commitment to empowering welfare recipients made them concerned that the difficult process of coalition building might dilute their agenda.²²³ Yet, as NWRO historian Guida West demonstrates, the NWRO worked in close concert with many different groups, including SCLC, CORE, the BPP, the NUL, as well as the nascent women's liberation groups and labor organizations. While NWRO formed coalitions, they were not easy. Gareth Davies recounts an encounter between Frances Fox Piven and Whitney Young of the NUL in which Young discussed how much more important it was "to get one black woman into a job as an airline stewardess than it was to get fifty poor families on to welfare."²²⁴ NWRO also had negative confrontations with SCLC when they first met with King in early February of 1968 in Chicago. The NWRO members were offended that King would take the helm of a national anti-poverty movement when they had been fighting on that front more consistently and for a longer period of time. While civil rights activists pursued the dual agenda, when it came to coalitions with welfare rights groups, particularly female-headed ones, male leaders often

Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

²²³ Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945-1965* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 159.

²²⁴ Quoted from Davies, 118.

championed the racial agenda over the economic one and failed to acknowledge that gender inequalities even existed.

All of the various activists groups that joined the PPC fought for freedom from *both* racial discrimination and economic exploitation, but African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, Native Americans, and white Americans of all classes subscribed to the sexist ideology that permeated U.S. society during the 1960s, despite women's efforts to expose gender-based discrimination and forge a women's liberation movement. While middle-class white women were organizing themselves as part of the newly formed National Organization for Women, women of color in the United States and all over the world were uniting with men of color to combat racial and economic oppression.

THE GHETTO-AS-COLONY

Nothing challenged the culture of poverty's characterizations of the poor as passive and apathetic more than poor people's activism. The decade was rife with worldwide revolutions, whether people were throwing off the shackles of European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the near East, or challenging dictators in Central and Latin America. With increasing knowledge of these rebellions came new understandings of poverty that were rooted in different traditions and challenged Americans' obsession with individualism, self-help, and the Keynesian faith in the market's ability to regulate and even eradicate poverty through increased production and deficit spending.²²⁵

²²⁵ See Katz, 27, 36-39 for a more detailed discussion of this transformation. Katz goes on to explain Neocolonialism: "automation and deindustrialization had left American blacks concentrated in urban ghettos with no vital economic function. Like other African states, American blacks now formed a colony no longer really needed by its colonizers. They were what

Some social scientists, particularly black economists and sociologists, began to endorse a ghetto-as-colony theory of U.S. neocolonialism, which helped explain the dual nature of economic and racial oppression of the U.S. system. But the concept of a nation within a nation stretched far beyond social scientists. One respondent in John Oliver Gwaltney's *Drylongso* exclaims, "I get tired of that one-nation-under-God boogie-joogle. We are ourselves. We are our *own* nation or country or whatever you want to class it. We are not no one tenth of some white something! . . . They need us more than we need them."²²⁶ The colonial model in the U.S. was quite simple—blacks and other minorities were racially segregated in urban centers, which deindustrialization had left void of any job opportunities, so black labor was exported from inner cities to factories and services jobs outside of their neighborhoods, while consumer goods were imported in, typically by a white storeowner.²²⁷ While social scientists typically tried to avoid confronting issues of class, race, and power, promoting the notion of a classless, hegemonic society, the ghetto as colony theory forced these issues to the surface. Michael Katz explains that during the mid-to-late 1960s, blacks responded to this new theory in three primary ways that marked the dominant trends in what he identifies as the second phase of the civil

some writers called a 'neocolony.' (Neocolonialism' is a term coined by Kwame Nkrumah, who used it to refer to the way in which imperialist powers switch tactics—that is, substitute foreign aid and other indirect measures for repression as a means to 'perpetuate colonialism while at the same time talking about freedom.'" See Katz, 61 and Kwame Nkrumah, "The Mechanisms of Neocolonialism," chapter 18 in *Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, reprinted in *Freedomways* 6 (1966): 139.

²²⁶ As this quote and so many other exclamations from poor respondents indicate, poor people quickly grasp the nature of their condition because they live it on a daily basis. No one needed to explain to this respondent that he was living in a neo-colonial situation or that his labor was being exploited. See Gwaltney, 19.

²²⁷ PPC participants from Marks, Mississippi complained of a similar yet even more desperate situation occurring in their small Delta town, where the local economy has been left in shambles

rights movement. Civil rights activists promoted redistribution of wealth, housing reform, and increased job opportunities, while black power advocates identified more closely with the concept of a nation within a nation, rejecting the system as a whole and promoting community control over basic social institutions.²²⁸

Meanwhile, a growing cadre of black economists debated the causes of poverty and its potential solutions. The ultra-conservative Thomas Sowell made a sharp distinction between discrimination and exploitation, arguing that in the U.S. context the former prevailed.²²⁹ Joseph Seward, who taught for seven years in Ghana, was concerned over the implications of promoting a Black Nationalist version of black capitalism that might simply alter the complexion of the employer/oppressor. Yet he argued that while Pan-African anti-colonialism promoted diasporic unity that African Americans could not break with the system of capitalism as easily as the Caribbean and African counterparts. While these economists and other black social scientists would shape poverty discourse, it was long-time civil rights activists who would most fully pursue the dual agenda.

In 1966 A. Philip Randolph proposed a “Freedom Budget” that would outline the civil rights movement’s social welfare agenda. The proposal represented the efforts of leading economists, cultural critics, and policy makers who had shaped the War on Poverty programs, such as Leon Keyserling, John Kenneth Galbraith, Michael Harrington, and Sargent Shriver. Using the newly founded A. Philip Randolph Institute’s

as residents leave the area to both work and consume, leaving no tax base, no employment, and no easily accessible or varied goods. See interviews with PPC participants. See Katz, 58.

²²⁸ Katz, 53. See also Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967), 16-31; and Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (New York: Morrow, 1965), 166 on blacks as a colonial people.

resources to perform research, conduct workshops, and issue reports, the group completed the proposal during the summer of 1966 and circulated it to civil rights leaders and other organization leaders, asking them to sign on in support, despite disagreements with individual items. Randolph held a press conference on October 26, 1966 in Harlem to announce the release of the eighty-four-page “Freedom Budget,” which he dedicated to “the full goals of the 1963 March.” The plan included specific demands and a timetable for enactment, calling for:

a minimum wage of \$2 an hour by 1968 or 1969, guaranteed income for the jobless, job projects and job training to achieve full employment of the employable, 100,000 new public school classrooms and an equal number of teachers, double expenditures for hospital construction and a fifty percent increase in medical school graduates.²³⁰

While government officials debated the “Freedom Budget” and activists signed on in support, it never materialized into actual legislation. Hamilton and Hamilton suggest that the “brief period from 1963 through 1967 was arguably the most liberal period for the achievement of civil rights *and* social welfare legislation in America’s history.” Yet even this detailed proposal, which they deem “the most explicit statement to date of the social welfare agenda by civil rights organizations”²³¹ was unable to persuade the nation’s leaders to fulfill the promise of an all out assault on poverty. While the “Freedom Budget” was far more radical than the War on Poverty programs, it failed to define a guaranteed job or income as a right of citizenship, rather than a handout, as the PPC did two years later. Its significance lies in the fact that it was the first time in the history of

²²⁹ Katz, 62-63.

²³⁰ A. Philip Randolph, “Introduction to the ‘Freedom Budget,’” in *A “Freedom Budget” for All Americans: Budgeting Resources, 1966-1975, to Achieve “Freedom From Want”* (New York: A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1966), 1.

the movement that civil rights leaders proposed a detailed and comprehensive plan to combat economic inequality for all U.S. citizens. Randolph argued that the budgetary constraints were minimal and that the progression of the Vietnam War would not affect the plan's implementation,²³² a public rebuke to SNCC activists, Dr. King, and other anti-war activists who connected the failures of the War on Poverty with the escalation of the Vietnam War.

The conflict between reform and rebellion was boiling within the civil rights movement as different groups competed over which direction the movement should take. Randolph's "Freedom Budget" was an attempt to pursue the dual agenda without isolating the movement from its most powerful ally—the federal government. But others believed that President Johnson had abandoned his commitment to combating economic and racial oppression in favor of conducting a massive war. During the spring of 1965, white cultural critic Nat Hentoff responded to Harrington's enthusiasm for "a new populism" and challenged Rustin's call for the formation of a coalition of blacks, "trade unionists, liberals and religious groups."²³³ Hentoff criticized Rustin's failure to acknowledge that the groups included were largely powerless and that the differences between the Democratic and Republican power structures were few. Recognizing the

²³¹ Hamilton and Hamilton, 153.

²³² Randolph, 5.

²³³ Randolph and Rustin both argued that an alliance with the Johnson administration was more important than critiquing the management of the war effort, whereas SNCC, CORE, and eventually King, although without the support of SCLC, came out against the war, and against Johnson. But Hentoff questioned Rustin's prediction that Southern segregationists and Northern "Big Business" would defect to the Republican Party, making the Democratic Party a bastion of liberalism. Nat Hentoff, "Beyond Civil Rights: A Reply to the 'Coalitionists,'" *The Massachusetts Review* (March-April 1965): 581-587; Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics" *Commentary*, (February, 1965) reprinted in *Time on Two Crosses: the Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, Edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise, (San Francisco: Cleis Press,

successes of ERAP, SNCC's organizing poor blacks in the rural South, and several grassroots welfare rights organizations in New York, Hentoff encouraged activists to help the poor organize themselves.²³⁴

CONCLUSION

While policy makers who developed the War on Poverty's philosophy of "maximum feasible participation" and activists leading the burgeoning welfare rights movement would try to put this principle into practice, the 1968 Poor People's Campaign was the first national effort to unite poor people of all races to collectively protest for economic rights. Chapter one has provided a detailed analysis of the discovery, debates, and demonstrations that addressed race and poverty during the 1960s in an attempt to illustrate the historical milieu out of which the PPC grew and recognize the groundwork activists laid in the struggle for both economic and racial equality. By placing the PPC within the larger history of poverty protest and poverty discourse, we can better understand not only why the campaign has been so dismissed and disparaged, but also how successful and unprecedented it actually was. The following chapter explores Dr. King and SCLC's pursuit of the dual agenda, culminating in the PPC, and the difficulties the organization faced when trying to build the first multiracial, national, sustained economic rights campaign of the era.

2003).

²³⁴ The New York groups included the Brooklyn Freedom Democratic Party, the Independent Action Committee for Social Progress on the Lower East Side, and the Block Development Project in East Harlem. See Hentoff, 585.

CHAPTER TWO

The Birth of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign: Mobilizing Nationally, Organizing Locally, & Forming Coalitions

“We ought to come in mule carts, in old trucks, in any kind of transportation people can get their hands on. People ought to come to Washington, sit down if necessary in the middle of the street and say, ‘We are here; we are poor; we don’t have any money; you have made us this way; you keep us down this way; and we’ve come to stay until you to do something about it.’”¹

-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

On June 5, 1966, James Meredith launched his “March Against Fear,” declaring that he would walk from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi to resist the fear sweeping the South as white vigilantes led a violent backlash against civil rights activists and to promote the right to vote. A white man shot Meredith on the second day of his journey. The leaders of the three most prominent direct action civil rights groups—Martin Luther King, Jr. of SCLC, Floyd McKissick of CORE, and Stokely Carmichael of SNCC—reignited the march while Meredith recovered in the hospital. The march became a defining moment for the movement. The media transformed the march into a public display of the tensions between King, who the press characterized as moderate due to his nonviolent stance, and Stokely Carmichael, who used the march to promote the “Black Power” slogan and debate its merits with King before the media.

This movement was also significant for the genesis of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. Not only did the younger, more radical Carmichael, who was well aware of King's socialist leanings, push the middle-aged minister further to the left, but a personal encounter during the summer campaign moved King to commit himself to fighting poverty. During the summer of 1966, King traveled to a little town in the Mississippi

¹ Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 535.

Delta, Marks, Mississippi to preach at the funeral of his friend, activist Armstead Phipps, who died of a heart attack along the “March Against Fear.”² King’s closest friend Ralph Abernathy recounts how a visit to a Head Start daycare center brought the reality of hunger in the Delta home for him and King:

We looked around the primitive schoolhouse and saw them watching us, wide-eyed and silent, having been told who we were. We smiled and waved, and several of them broke into broad grins. They seemed bright and alert, but something bothered me about them. Then I realized what it was: virtually all of them were under weight, a condition that lent a special poignancy to their enormous eyes.

After witnessing the teacher quarter an apple to feed four hungry students, King uncharacteristically broke into tears. Later that evening, King said,

“I can’t get those children out of my mind . . . We’ve got to do something for them . . . We can’t let that kind of poverty exist in this country. I don’t think people really know that little school children are slowly starving in the United States of America. I didn’t know it.”³

Witnessing this stark image of hunger and deprivation prompted King to focus his attention and SCLC’s resources more fully on combating poverty. Eventually this experience led him to create the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign and make Marks, Mississippi a focal point.⁴ While the PPC would later transform this little Delta town (the subject of chapter five) during the mid-1960s younger, more radical black activists began to intensify their critiques of SCLC and their tactics.

When asked about the tension between SNCC and SCLC, Stokely Carmichael explained that the difference between the two organizations was “Mobilizing versus

² See Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train* (Jackson, MS: Town Square Books, Inc., 1998), 17.

³ Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989): 413.

organizing.” The interviewer, Godfrey Hodgson, explained that what Carmichael meant was that, “where King wanted to mobilize the black community for massive demonstrations that would impress public opinion, force the federal government to commit itself, and wring concessions from local power structures, SNCC wanted to organize black people to win power for themselves.”⁵ Hodgson simplifies the differences even further by claiming that what mobilizing really meant was reliance on white help where organizing meant black self-reliance. Robert T. Chase uses this same binary and argues that the PPC failed because of a lack of white support and the growing split between civil rights and black power.⁶ While these binaries are neat and tidy, they do not reflect the complexity of social movements. Yes, SNCC was better at organizing local people while SCLC excelled at mobilizing for big media events, but the two were inseparable and necessary components of the black freedom struggle. Mobilizing often included forming coalitions with whites to gain the funding, resources, and media attention needed to sway the nation, but mobilizing was not just about white support, and whites were not exempt from grassroots organizing. Both SCLC and SNCC typically supported and recognized the importance of both tactics but excelled in different areas.

The difference between mobilizing and organizing, and the complaints from SNCC about SCLC’s mobilizing tactics were more about time and place than white or black. SCLC had a history of successfully mobilizing communities for big events, such as in Birmingham or Selma, but then leaving once the big event had received a local

⁵ Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 192.

response and national media attention. SNCC worked more closely with local people to build grassroots organizations rooted in the local communities' needs that would survive beyond the existence of big media events. SCLC's leadership recognized that the PPC was an opportunity to do both—to organize local movements while mobilizing for a national one. Both tactics were necessary to provide the numbers of participants and volunteers needed to conduct a national anti-poverty crusade.

Through a consideration of the organization's mid-to-late 1960s campaigns and the cultural milieu they existed within during this chaotic time, chapter two traces the broader changes in SCLC's goals and tactics and explains why the PPC emerged when it did. The escalating war in Vietnam, the violence in urban centers, and the dramatic evidence of poverty moved King and SCLC to make several significant transformations: from desegregation and civil rights to peace and economic human rights, from non-violence to more militant civil disobedience, from interracial (black and white) to multi-racial, and from a southern base to a national coalition.⁷ King had openly challenged Johnson on the Vietnam War, claiming that not only were the poor fighting the war, but that the war was keeping people in poverty because the government had abandoned the War on Poverty and its funding for the war in Southeast Asia.⁸ During 1967-1968, policy makers and academics exposed the hunger and malnutrition that plagued the nation's poor. When NAACP attorney and long-time friend Marian Wright relayed Robert

⁶ Robert T. Chase, "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City," *Essays in History*, Volume 40, (Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia, 1998).

⁷ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 357-383; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 527-623.

⁸ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 593-593. James Bevel in particular was upset that King abandoned the anti-war campaign for the anti-poverty campaign.

Kennedy's suggestion to "bring the poor people to Washington," King immediately embraced the idea.⁹ He proposed taking approximately 3,000 people to live in the heart of the nation's capital until their demands were met, declaring "We've got to find a method that will disrupt our cities if necessary, to create the crisis that will force the nation to look at the situation, dramatize it, and yet at the same time not destroy life or property."¹⁰ This chapter explores SCLC's early organizing efforts and the effect the organization's actions had on the PPC's overall outcome, while assessing both the difficulties and rewards of building a multiracial, class-based coalition.

SCLC DURING THE MID-1960S

Throughout the mid-1960s SCLC was active yet on the fringes of most of the major civil rights campaigns.¹¹ SNCC activists grew fed up with King and SCLC who tended to swoop into community after community to lead a media event, and accepted credit for legislative successes that came after SNCC's months and even years of sustained grassroots organizing.¹² While SCLC played a more prominent role in the Selma Voting Rights campaign, SNCC activists heavily criticized "De Lawd's" theatrics on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Criticism rose from all angles when King stopped activists from proceeding across the bridge and had them kneel and pray on what is now known as

⁹ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 451-453. In 1967, Wright testified before the Congress on the impoverished conditions in Mississippi and invited the senators to visit the state and witness the conditions themselves. As Attorney General, Robert Kennedy made the trip to Cleveland, Mississippi and was so moved by the poverty that he witnessed that he proposed that King bring the poor people to Washington.

¹⁰ Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 580.

¹¹ They were relatively uninvolved in 1964 Freedom Summer and played a behind-the-scenes and often critiqued role in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's attempts to secure representation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.

“Turnaround Tuesday,” preventing a confrontation between activists and the Alabama National Guard like the one that occurred on March 7, 1965, now known as “Bloody Sunday.” A growing cadre of radical activists questioned King’s commitment to laying his life on the line for the movement, and SNCC activists increasingly mocked King’s role as the preeminent leader of the movement.¹³

After passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which most argue resulted from the Selma march, SCLC planned two projects—a national economic boycott of the state of Alabama to promote free elections and protest racial violence, and the initiation of a new program led by Hosea Williams—the Summer Community Organization and Political Education program, known as SCOPE, which recruited northern students to work in 120 Black Belt counties.¹⁴ Meanwhile, critiques of Johnson’s escalation of the war in Vietnam were rising, and on May 11, 1965, while on a tour of the Alabama Black Belt, King proposed peaceful anti-war rallies as a response. Radicals from the black power movement and New Left pushed King to come out publicly against the war, while many both in and out of the civil rights movement challenged whether King had stepped out of place by condemning the war, despite his role as a minister and long-time pacifist.

The organization was divided over King’s next initiative, moving the movement north. Some worried that northern support for the southern movement would deteriorate if the movement attacked northern practices and policies, but Chicago’s civil rights

¹² See Carson, *In Struggle* and Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* for more on the tumultuous relationship between SNCC and SCLC.

¹³ Robert Williams was one of King’s sharpest critics. He sent a telegram to King challenging him to either face the threat of death and violence like other activists or remove himself from the leadership of the movement. See Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

coalition, the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO) was committed to bringing King and SCLC to Chicago. On January 26, 1966, King moved into a slum apartment on Chicago's West Side and a week later called on his staff to join him in experiencing the living conditions of the urban poor. Housing conditions and residential segregation became the campaign's focus. The city's powerful mayor, Richard Daley, CCCO, and SCLC competed for control during the Chicago Freedom Movement. Between January 7, 1966 when King first announced the campaign, until late August when SCLC left Chicago in defeat, SCLC revealed that the southern ministers had a poor understanding of northern city politics. They displaced the local leadership and argued with the local grassroots movement over tactics,¹⁵ yet the Chicago Freedom Movement did achieve some accomplishments while in Chicago. They organized a "gang convention" and urged inner city youth to apply their energy and talent nonviolently to the movement. Several Blackstone Rangers became King's unofficial bodyguards,¹⁶ many of whom would later serve as marshals, the security force in Resurrection City.

¹⁴ See Fairclough, 253-277.

¹⁵ After leading several marches through Chicago's hostile white suburbs, one of SCLC's newest yet most vocal staff members and a Chicago native, Jesse Jackson, publicly feuded with King over how long and hard to pursue the campaign. When King refused to lead local people into Chicago's fiercest and most segregated neighborhood—Cicero—Jackson under-mined King's authority and proceeded to lead the march without him, while King negotiated a settlement with Daley and the city government. For a more complete account of SCLC's Chicago movement see Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 297-319; Fairclough, 279-307; Peake, 207-212; James R. Ralph, Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); and *Chicago 1966: Open Housing Marches, Summit Negotiations, and Operation Breadbasket*, edited by David J. Garrow (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1989). For more on local residents' perspectives on housing and poverty in Chicago, see Studs Terkel, *Division Street: America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967) and Philip A. Johnson, *Call Me Neighbor, Call Me Friend: The Case History of the Integration of a Neighborhood on Chicago's South Side* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965).

The other accomplishment was the initiation of Operation Breadbasket. Jesse Jackson headed this program, which encouraged black ministers to organize local boycotts demanding that white employers hire black workers. Despite these accomplishments, King left Chicago with his reputation severely damaged and his staff in discord, but with his commitment to both economic and racial rights emboldened.

The movement's increasingly radical character pushed King to reveal his leftist leanings during the mid-to-late 1960s. In a speech made in October of 1966, King advocated a \$4,000 guaranteed annual income for all citizens and first proposed that a group of poor people protest in Washington, D.C. He reportedly presented the basic concept of the Poor People's Campaign over a year before formally announcing the movement, calling for a mule train to Washington and mass civil disobedience in the nation's capital until the government met the needs of the poor.¹⁷ At a SCLC retreat held from November 13-15, 1966, King called for a radical redistribution of wealth, arguing that the guaranteed income would solve the basic problem. He declared to his staff, "something is wrong with capitalism,"¹⁸ an explicit challenge to the system itself. While the media tried to play up the friction between civil rights leaders and the rising tide of young black militants, the differences were largely a matter of form rather than content.

During this time, the burgeoning Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton established in Oakland, California in October of 1966, was formulating their platform. The Panther's 10-point program, "What We Want, What We Believe," echoed many demands King and others civil rights and welfare rights

¹⁶ Fariclough, 289.

¹⁷ See chapter's opening quote and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 535.

leaders advocated, such as full employment, decent housing, accurate and adequate education, protection from police brutality and an unjust justice system, as well as “freedom” and the “power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.”¹⁹ Along with sharing the Panthers critique of capitalism and economic inequality, King also shared the Black Power movement’s critique of the escalating war in Vietnam. While King had made statements against the war in the previous two years, he made his first public declaration opposing the war on April, 4, 1967, at the Riverside Church in New York to a congregation of around 3,000. On April 15, 1967, he joined forces with thousands of anti-war protesters in New York city for the Spring Mobilization campaign and witnessed the potential of a broad based coalition of left-leaning activists. King made an explicit connection between the growing military budget to fund the war and the abandonment of the War on Poverty programs and challenged Johnson to abandon a destructive and unjust war and accept their moral obligation to combat poverty at home.²⁰ An increasing focus on hunger in one of the richest and the most powerful nations in the world would convince others that more attention to domestic issues was warranted.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Address” (12/6/66) KL, King Papers.

¹⁹ Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, “What We Want, What We Believe,” reprinted in *The Black Panthers Speak* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 2-3. Where King differed from the Panthers was on the issue of self-defense in public protests and on some of their more radical demands, such as exemption from military service for all black men and the release of “all black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails.

²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” reprinted in *A Testament of Hope*, 231-244; see in particular, 232-234.

DISCOVERING HUNGER AMID ABUNDANCE

During the winter of 1965-1966, thirty-five starving, black U.S. citizens invaded the abandoned Air Force base at Greenville, Mississippi, and distributed leaflets that said, “We are here because we are hungry and cold and we have no jobs or land.” Federal troops evicted the group, but the event triggered the creation of the Federal Interdepartmental Committee on Nutrition.²¹ The following February, the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights held hearings in Jackson, Mississippi, where they received widespread complaints from local poor people that the replacement of the commodity distribution program with the food-stamp program was actually detrimental because many in Mississippi, and across the country, did not have enough money to buy the food stamps.²² In March of 1967, Marian Wright, a young attorney for NAACP Legal Defense Fund, testified before the Senate Labor Committee’s subcommittee on poverty conditions in Mississippi, concurring with the testimony made in Jackson. She explains years later:

“The biggest problem then was survival. I mean we were having major problems of hunger, even starvation. There were people in Mississippi who had no income . . . When you began to shift to food stamps and charge even two dollars per person, there were people in Mississippi who didn’t even have that two dollars. It was very hard to get people from Washington to believe that there were families that could not afford a dollar or two. But the poor were struggling. They were being pushed off the plantations because of the mechanization of cotton, because of the use of chemical weed killing . . . the Senator Eastlands were subsidized in the hundreds and thousands of dollars by the federal government, the peasants or the tenants on those farms literally could not eat and did not have the most basic survival needs in this rich American country.”²³

²¹ Citizen’s Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the U.S., *Hunger USA* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 330.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Marian Wright Edelman quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 451.

Wright believed the only solution was to bring government officials down to Mississippi to witness the conditions first-hand.

On April 21, 1967, the Civil Rights Commission issued a report supporting Wright's claims, while poor blacks testified before Congress that local administration of the program was both strict and discriminatory, and complained that the value of bonus coupons decreased as income increased, making food stamps unappealing to the working poor. After watching a powerful television documentary on hunger, Senator George McGovern, chair of the new Senate Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, called for public hearings on the issue.²⁴ Five days later the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty held the second hearings on hunger in Jackson and conducted field trips to impoverished communities across Mississippi. Wright argued that, "one has to have someone lift the window," and that is what bringing the senators down to Mississippi did.

One of the most powerful senators on the trip was Robert Kennedy. When visiting a family's dark and dank home in Cleveland, Mississippi, Wright recounts how Kennedy "got down on his knees and he tried to talk to the child and get a response from the child . . . I remember watching him in near tears."²⁵ Moved to action by what they witnessed, the senators returned and demanded free food stamps for those with no cash income, loosening of restrictions, declaration of an emergency state to release federal food reserves, and authorization for OEO to use emergency family-loan authority to

²⁴ Katz, 106.

²⁵ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 451; see also Robert Sherrill, "It Isn't True That Nobody Starves in America," *New York Times Magazine*, June 4, 1967, 22-24, reprinted in *The Paradox of American Poverty*, 70-72.

subsidize food purchased or food stamps.²⁶ In May of 1967, the OEO announced small cash-loan programs for food for four Mississippi counties—Bolivar, Leflore, Quitman (which includes Marks), and Coahoma. The Field Foundation dispatched a team of doctors to examine children’s health conditions throughout Mississippi.

The group of physicians reported their findings to Congress on July 11, 1967, before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty heard witnesses present testimony on hunger in the United States. Robert Coles, a staff child psychiatrist with Harvard University Health Services who had worked in the rural South, in Appalachia, and in the inner-cities and as a consultant to the Southern Regional Council, Appalachian Volunteers, and the National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, published the group’s finding along with photographs by Al Clayton of the stark poverty and hunger the senators witnessed in *Still Hungry in America*.²⁷ Coles’ goal was to mimic the photography of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, which he declared had:

moved thousands of Americans to shame and indignation and sympathy and a sense of longing—to say something, to do something that would change things, so that the toughness, the persistence, the desperate strength in people barely able to stay fed, clothed, and under a roof would not prove wasted.²⁸

While Clayton’s photographs provided moving images of the nation’s poor, it was poor people’s testimony that painted the grimmest picture of the hunger poor rural southerners

²⁶ *Hunger USA*, 331.

²⁷ Robert Coles, *Still Hungry in America* Photographs by Al Clayton, Introduction by Edward Kennedy, (New York: New American Library, 1969). Coles is also the author of *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (1967), the first in a five-volume series followed by: *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* (1971); *The South Goes North* (1971); *Eskimos, Chicanos, Indians* (1977); and *Privileged Ones* (1977). Throughout the different volumes in this series, Cole uses direct, sustained, clinical observation as the basis of his studies to understand how different groups of children, and to some degree their parents, cope with the stress of poverty.

faced. Coles included lengthy discussions of the rural poor's diets, and declaring that there was no better way to understand U.S. poverty "than to get them talking about water and cola."²⁹ While middle-class whites often critiqued the dietary habits of poor people, the rural poor did what they had to do to survive. As one woman explains,

"Here in Alabama if you're one of us, it's very bad, the water situation is. You spend a lot of your time worrying about water. That's the truth. You just don't begin a day without deciding who's going to get the water, and when, and how good it'll be when it comes back. That's why I use Coke for my children, right from the start I do. It's the best thing you can get to take away their thirst and give them the sugar they need . . . My grandma, she said we'd all be dried up and dead and gone from starvation if God didn't send us Cokes."³⁰

While some might question whether a drink that can clean one's car battery is a gift from God, soda was cheaper than milk or juice and provided a economical alternative in areas where the water was too contaminated or simply unavailable. Coles' medical report revealed a host of problems facing most of the children in the region.³¹

In addition to exposing the devastation that marked the Mississippi Delta, Coles also reveals racial strife among its citizens. He heard complaints from poor whites who claimed, "here, no one cares a thing about us. We're lower than the niggers," while poor blacks declared: "It can't be that it's any worse anyplace else. I'll tell you one thing, no white man lives like this. They all have their food and their water and their money. Even

²⁸ Coles, 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

³¹ Coles reports that, "almost every child we saw was in a state of negative nitrogen balance; that is, a marked inadequacy of diet has led the body to consume its own protein tissue." In addition, chronic hunger and malnutrition had led to the 'wasting of muscles; enlarged hearts; edematous legs and in some cases the presence of abdominal edema (so-called swollen or bloated belly); spontaneous bleeding of the mouth or nose or evidence of internal hemorrhage; osteoporosis—weakening of bone structure—and, as a consequence, fractures unrelated to injury or accident; and again and again, fatigue, exhaustion, weakness." See Coles, 85. The list of symptoms goes

the ones that don't work—somehow they get taken care of. But not us.”³² While perspectives differed on who was worse off, the poor across racial divides agreed that the War on Poverty programs were grossly inadequate. One interviewee declared, “they were just like putting a Band-Aid when the patient is real bad sick, and needs a lot of surgery, yes sir.”³³ War on Poverty programs had failed to penetrate the poverty of the rural South, but ingenious poor blacks acted on the black power movement's call for self-determination.

Challenging stereotypes of poor people as lazy and apathetic, a group of poor blacks in Jackson, Mississippi established the Poor People's Corporation in August of 1965. This organization established fifteen self-run cooperatives throughout Mississippi that employed just under two hundred people (all shareholders) and trained an additional two hundred in producing whatever products the groups decided to produce. Members paid twenty-five cents to join the cooperatives, which were independently funded. The average salary was twenty-three dollars a week compared to the typical wages of twelve to fifteen dollars a week. One co-op, the McComb Leather Cooperative, raised its weekly salary to a whopping fifty dollars a week. The various co-ops were able to market their goods through the collectively owned Liberty House in Jackson, which sold goods of not only poor blacks, but also poor white craftsmen from North Carolina and Puerto Rican seamstresses from New York.³⁴ On July 24, 1968, a month after the fall of

on for another page and half and demonstrates the life and death situation many faced in the Mississippi Delta.

³² Coles, 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁴ Art Goldberg, “Negro Self-help,” *New Republic*, June 10, 1967, reprinted in *The Paradox of American Poverty*, 97-99; see also Eileen Shanahan, “Corporations for the Poor Proposed by 26

Resurrection City, a group of senators embraced the idea of black self-help and proposed legislation supporting the formation of additional community cooperatives. While the co-ops were obviously successful, they also exposed a long-standing divide between the solutions for poor blacks and the economic assistance for the rest of the nation.

The majority of Americans throughout U.S. history have characterized government relief programs as handouts—immoral and a symbol of laziness. During the late 1960s, journalists and activists increasingly exposed the hypocrisies within the U.S. system. A *Saturday Evening Post* article from April of 1967 lamented that the middle-class, “who accept Government handouts with perfectly clear consciences” was somehow exempt from this stereotype, whether it be the “professor with a grant for scientific research, the wheat rancher getting Federal subsidies, the war veteran with a monthly pension.”³⁵ While government subsidies and social insurance were seen as American traditions, welfare was consistently marred by suspicions of mismanagement and abuse and demonized as a handout rather than a right. Exposing this hypocrisy and demanding a guaranteed income or job would become central goals of the PPC.

REDEFINING HUMAN ECONOMIC RIGHTS AS CIVIL RIGHTS

As more and more people promoted adequate income, food, housing, and health care as basic human rights, King and SCLC escalated their pursuit of an economic rights agenda. At a SCLC retreat at Frogmore held from May 21-22, 1967, the organization agreed to focus on an economic human rights agenda by attacking the slums of northern

Senators,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1968, reprinted in *The Paradox of American Poverty*, 99-100.

³⁵ See Editorial, *Saturday Evening Post*, April 8, 1967, reprinted in *The Paradox of American Poverty*, 124-125.

cities, particularly Cleveland and Chicago, and challenging the Vietnam War as the greatest impediment to combating poverty.³⁶ King concluded his conference address declaring, “We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights,” from a “reform movement,” into “an era of revolution.”³⁷

After receiving increasing pressure from the black power advocates within the movement, both on the Meredith March and through the press, King responded to criticisms and chartered his new course of action in his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Published during the summer of 1967, King recounted his experience on the Meredith March, explained his perspective on Black Power—demonstrating sympathy with their frustration and a shared interest in obtaining power, but a power based in love not hate—while advocating an expanded assault on poverty. He proposed that blacks organize to affect the economy as both workers and consumers through increased union activity and economic boycotts, both of which SCLC had attempted to tackle through Operation Breadbasket. He also supported electoral politics as a way of accessing power.³⁸ And for the first time, King made a public declaration that the economic agenda must include other impoverished groups. He declared:

As we work to get rid of the economic strangulation that we face as a result of poverty, we must not overlook the fact that millions of Puerto Ricans, Mexican

³⁶ See Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 563.

³⁷ “To Charter Our Course for the Future,” 5/22/67, KL, King Papers.

³⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 140-145, 146-157; the remainder of the text dealt with conflicts dividing the movement and need for unity (157-166), world unity, critique of war (167-191); Appendix: Programs and Prospects, in education, employment, civil and human rights, and housing (193-202).

Americans, Indians, and Appalachian whites are also poverty-stricken. Any serious war against poverty must of necessity include them.³⁹

King also made a plea for unity within the divided movement and offered a more global concept of community that promoted peace worldwide.

The riots/rebellions in Newark from July 12-17 and in Detroit from July 23-27 jolted the nation. On August 15, 1967, King responded to these revolts in an address titled, “The Crisis in America’s Cities: An Analysis of Social Disorder and a Plan of Action Against Poverty, Discrimination and Racism in Urban America.”⁴⁰ Rather than blaming the rioters, as many black leaders would do, King insisted that the collective revolt was a protest of deteriorating slums and empty promises, which he declared were “the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society.”⁴¹ Rather than asking Congress for “favors,” King argued that activists must devise a non-violent way to “create a situation in which they deem it wise and prudent to act responsibility and decency.” He proposed that rather than rioting, activists should use their “rage as a constructive and creative force” to “forcefully cripple the operations of an oppressive society.”⁴² The following day, in his President’s Address to the SCLC convention, King charted SCLC’s efforts in improving the economic status of blacks through their work in Chicago and Cleveland and with Operation Breadbasket boycotts, as well as in Grenada, Mississippi. But then he asked his audience to focus on the theme of the conference, “Where do we go from here?” King embraced some elements of black power, promoting black pride and

³⁹ King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 132.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Crisis in America’s Cities: An Analysis of Social Disorder and a Plan of Action Against Poverty, Discrimination and Racism in Urban America.” (Atlanta: SCLC, August 15, 1967), KL, SCLC, 178:37.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

employed black instead Negro, while clarifying that power should be understood as “nothing but the ability to achieve purpose.” King identified SCLC’s purpose as increasing both economic and political power by advocating for a guaranteed annual income or job for all Americans. While King had demonstrated sympathy for the rioters in the previous day’s address, he argued that the improvements that resulted were meager, “like improving the food in the prison while the people remain securely incarcerated behind bars.” Rather than simply venting, King challenged his audience to question the entire society and to recognize that racism, economic exploitation, and neo-imperialist wars were all inherently connected.⁴³

King was obviously already thinking about a massive campaign to combat poverty, but several factors helped SCLC develop the specific agenda for the Poor People’s Campaign. A Harris Poll demonstrating support for anti-poverty efforts was published in *Newsweek* on August 21, and in the following weeks King and Andrew Young met with editors of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* who also expressed great concern over the poverty problem.⁴⁴ The first concrete suggestion for the campaign came from Robert Kennedy who met with Marian Wright in late August, 1967 at his home in Virginia, Hickory Hill, and encouraged her to “Tell him [King] to bring the poor people to

⁴² King, “The Crisis in America’s Cities,” 5.

⁴³ See Martin Luther King, Jr., “President’s Address to the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 1967” in Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockridge, ed., *The Rhetoric of Black Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); for analysis of this speech and King’s relationship to Black Power, see Robert L. Scott, “Black Power Bends Martin Luther King,” *Speaker and Gavel*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (March 1968): 80-86, reprinted in *The Rhetoric of Black Power*, 166-177.

⁴⁴ Young, 438.

Washington.”⁴⁵ When Wright met with King in early September, she relayed the message from Kennedy and proposed that SCLC bring a group of poor people to the office of Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz to perform a sit-in. King’s close adviser Stanley Levison invoked the Bonus March and proposed a massive camp-in in the capital.⁴⁶ In mid-September SCLC’s key board members, senior staff, and northern advisers held a retreat in Warrenton, Virginia, where they hashed out pros and cons of the Poor People’s Campaign.

King faced a great deal of opposition from SCLC. The harshest critique came from his long-time adviser, Bayard Rustin, who warned against enacting any form of civil disobedience.⁴⁷ William Rutherford, who had organized the Friends of SCLC in Europe in 1966 and was appointed executive director of SCLC during the summer of 1967, declared that, “basically almost no one on the staff thought that the next priority, the next major movement, should be focused on poor people or the question of poverty in America.”⁴⁸ At the time James Bevel wanted to remain focused on combating slums in northern cities, Hosea Williams promoted voter registration campaigns in the South, Jesse Jackson wanted to continue to develop Operation Breadbasket, and Andrew Young worried that SCLC’s budget of under a million dollars necessitated smaller campaigns in the South. Young explains that this dissension was common in the organization: “SCLC was always a battle of egos. We were like a team of wild horses. Each one had very strong opinions and their own ideas about the way the movement should go, and Dr. King

⁴⁵ Marian Wright quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 453.

⁴⁶ Fairclough, 358.

⁴⁷ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 599.

⁴⁸ William Rutherford quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 454.

encouraged that.”⁴⁹ After testifying before the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders on October 23 and spending October 30-November 3 in jail for a contempt of court charge from the Birmingham campaign, King reconvened the fractured SCLC staff from November 27-December 1, 1967 at Frogmore to settle on the details of the upcoming campaign. Andrew Young, usually the voice of moderation, proposed that activists lie on highways, obstruct doors at government offices, and boycott local schools to provoke a confrontation and dramatize the situation, while others proposed protesting for better health care at hospitals or by tying up the White House switchboard with complaints regarding poverty in a nationwide “call-in.”

King’s plans were more focused, proposing that a small cadre of well-trained activists present their demands to government officials and remain in the capital until the demands were met. When Congress failed to meet those demands, and King was confident they would, a second group of local contingents would caravan to Washington, a southern contingent walking “a considerable portion of it through the most tense areas.” The final stage would be a “second March on Washington,” but as Andrew Young quipped years later, this march would be no “picnic.”⁵⁰ After presenting such grandiose plans, he met a lot of resistance from his staff. Many challenged King and questioned how they would bail out of the situation if they were unable to obtain any concrete gains. Abernathy recounts that King retorted back, “I don’t care about bailing out . . . I just want these people to be seen by the American public. They’re invisible now. If the public could just see them, then something would be done.” His two main opponents

⁴⁹ Andrew Young quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 455.

⁵⁰ See Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 582.

were Jesse Jackson and James Bevel, both of who were greatly concerned with “saving face.”⁵¹ But King’s initial plan dominated the direction of the PPC, even after his death.

MOBILIZING NATIONALLY/ORGANIZING LOCALLY

On December 4, 1967, King publicly announced SCLC’s plans for the Poor People’s Campaign. The only specific demands mentioned were “to secure at least jobs and income for all.” Focusing more on the basic strategy involved and the motivation for the campaign than legislative goals. King explained that SCLC staff would organize poor people from ten key cities and five rural areas who would travel to Washington, D.C. where they would camp-in until their demands were met. King warned his audience in dramatic terms that, “the stability of a civilization, and the potential for free government, and the simple honor of men are at stake.” Recognizing divisions within the black community and throughout the nation at large, he declared, “all of us can almost feel the presence of a kind of social insanity which could lead to national ruin.” He explained that this movement would provide an outlet for poor people’s growing frustration, which King warned “cannot be placated by the glamour of multi-billion-dollar exploits in space . . . fooled by patronizing gestures and half-way promises.” The statement welcomed participation from “all Americans of good will,” but particularly called out to “the millions of non-Negro poor—Indians, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachians,

⁵¹ Abernathy explains that both Jackson and Bevel were “unremitting in their opposition –two young pragmatists who were lecturing the older and more experienced idealist.” Yet both would embrace the campaign once underway and compete for its leadership. See Abernathy, 415.

and others” to join forces with poor blacks in the campaign.⁵² The PPC would be the first national anti-poverty movement of the era that represented the needs of all these groups.

In January of 1968, SCLC produced an “Economic Fact Sheet for the Poor People’s Campaign” to provide activists mobilizing for the PPC with statistics that demonstrated the need for the campaign. These statistics revealed the wide gap between the minority poor and the white majority in terms of income, government subsidies, employment, education, housing, health, and crime. The PPC promoted a guaranteed income or job as the primary solution and made comparisons with other developed Western nations that already had these systems in place. The document also argued that those who remained poor in the richest nation’s in the world lacked power, and that lack of power led to inadequate jobs, incomes, housing, schools, health care, and an overall lack of respect. It encouraged activists that the U.S. had the means to abolish poverty and insisted that they had the right to protest for their basic needs.⁵³ The Fact Sheet also presented SCLC’s motivation for pursuing the PPC, their stance on breaking unjust and incidental laws while remaining nonviolent, and outlined potential questions and appropriate answers for organizers whom the press might interview. The Fact Sheet also explained why Washington, as the seat of government, was the ideal location, and

⁵² “Statement By Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President SCLC” (Atlanta: SCLC, December 4, 1967), KL, SCLC, 178:38.

⁵³ “Poor People in America Economic Fact Sheet for the Poor People’s Campaign (For SCLC staff only, not for publication) January, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:18.

proposed that dramatizing poverty would move the nation's conscience to act on behalf of the poor.⁵⁴

SCLC also produced brochures for the campaign that pictured representatives of all of the different impoverished groups involved. The pamphlet declared:

“The Time to Act is NOW! Poor People's lives are disrupted and dislocated everyday. We want to put a stop to this poverty. Racism and discrimination cause families to be kept apart, men to become desperate, women to live in fear, and children to starve.”⁵⁵

Bernard Lafayette was put in charge of recruitment of an initial 1,500 poor people,⁵⁶ and throughout January and early February SCLC held strategy sessions with welfare rights groups⁵⁷ and civil rights leaders to determine the specific goals and format of the PPC. SCLC also held mass meetings throughout the Mississippi Delta to mobilize support for the campaign and register participants to go to Washington. At these mass meetings local poor people presented their complaints, most of which mimicked those coming out of the statewide leadership meetings.⁵⁸

While the grassroots participants and SCLC leadership seemed to agree on the PPC's goals of the campaign, dueling perspectives abounded from all directions. During the first week in February, King traveled to Washington, D.C. where he met with a wide spectrum of local civil rights leaders and black ministers and members of the D.C.

⁵⁴ While these early documents established the basic goals and methods of the PPC, they do not outline the agenda or promote the idea of a central site, or tent city, from which the protests would be launched. Ibid.

⁵⁵ See “The Time to Act is Now!” KL, SCLC, 179:18.

⁵⁶ Young, 444.

⁵⁷ See report from Tut Tate to SCLC, January 27, 1968, KL, SCLC 178:9.

⁵⁸ See report from Leon Hall, SCLC Project Director, Grenada, Mississippi to Hosea Williams, Field Director, SCLC, “Meetings and Recruitment for Poor People's Campaign to Washington, D.C.,” February 26, 1968, KL, SCLC, 178:9.

Chamber of Commerce to gain local endorsements and acquire vital resources for the PPC. He also met with black radicals, such as SNCC leaders H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael, who he thought might challenge the movement for being too moderate. King used this opportunity to meet with the press and further elaborate the PPC's goals.⁵⁹ Despite his efforts, King received a substantial blow on February 2 when President Johnson held a press conference calling on the civil rights movement to choose more productive means of protest.⁶⁰ While Johnson's response hurt King, he had already split with Johnson over the war in Vietnam. As Coretta Scott King recounts, "When the president asked him, 'Dr. King, what if you fail?' he said, 'It will not be Martin King, Jr., who failed it will be America that failed.'"⁶¹ Johnson was not the only one who had misgivings about the campaign. A California newspaper article reported widespread dissent among blacks, citing 71% in opposition to the campaign, 65% who refused to participate, 76% percent who believed the campaign would harm King's image, and a whopping 84% who believed that the PPC would jeopardize Johnson's chances of being re-elected.⁶² Despite the criticisms from the press, the government, and the public, the poor people who were organizing local, grassroots campaign in support of the PPC were more interested in what the movement could do for them.

While SCLC was mobilizing communities for the national campaign, local leaders used PPC related events as a way of addressing local issues. At a mass meeting on February 5, 1968, at Bell Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, Rev. Boone

⁵⁹ McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 24.

⁶⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 595.

⁶¹ Coretta Scott King quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 456.

declared that in preparation for the “D.C. confrontation,” he was “‘gonna confront Charlie in Montgomery right now.’” The discussion quickly turned from the PPC to a local issue, the firing of a politically active black disc jockey, Ralph Featherstone, from WRMA, “a white-owned” black radio station. The group immediately made plans to initiate a local boycott to protest the racially motivated firing.⁶³ The PPC’s local organizing led to the formation of a statewide organization, the Alabama Poor People’s Crusade (APPC), which formed to initiate statewide recruitment for the campaign and elected one representative from each county to serve on a temporary Executive Committee, linking activists with similar concerns across the state to foster local activity both during and after the PPC.

Atlanta organizers joined with their Alabama counterparts in embracing the PPC as an opportunity to foster local coalitions. SCLC’s Executive Secretary for the State of Georgia, Hosea Williams, confronted the divisions within the black community and stressed the need for broad-based coalitions:

unity is the thing of the hour. Yes, some of us are defined as radicals, some as moderates and others as ‘Uncle Toms,’ but we are all inextricably bound—we are Black; each of us are flesh of one another’s flesh and blood of one another’s blood. Therefore our destiny is bound together.⁶⁴

SCLC’s basic strategy for mobilizing local communities through mass meetings consisted of three main components: a mock trial in which Dr. King acted as judge, putting “American on trial for robbery and exploitation of the poor,” a collection speech from Rev. Abernathy, followed by a final rallying speech from Dr. King. These tactics worked

⁶² See Almerna Lomax, “Negroes Turning Against Dr. King, New Lomax Poll Shows,” December 12, 1967, KL SCLC 178:1.

⁶³ “Alabama Field Report,” KL, SCLC, 177:43.

well in the rural South, but SCLC organizers had to be more ingenious when mobilizing more diverse populations in other areas.

While support for the PPC was much greater in the South, the mobilizing efforts also inspired activism in some Northeastern urban centers. Responding to the massive riots in New Jersey during July of 1967, Rev. Herman Jenkins argued that the PPC provided an opportunity for New Jersey residents to “fashion a confrontation unique in drama but firm in discipline to wrest from government fundamental measures to end the long agony of the hardcore poor.” Organizers in New Jersey prepared for the PPC as both a local and national movement, raising money not only for participants traveling to D.C., but also for the families left behind at home. Activists called on sympathetic individuals, organizations, and churches to “Adopt a Family” and provide childcare or childcare expenses, offering either \$15 donations towards the care of one family or adoptions of entire families by churches or organizations.⁶⁵

Organizers in Cleveland also worked to build both a local and national movement while appealing to a wide range of supporters. Local organizers Hilbert Perry and Mike Bibler held meetings with welfare rights activists and black militants and canvassed white organizations, such as the Americans for Democratic Action, American Friends Service Committee, the Western Reserve Social Work students and Western Reserve faculty, Domestic Workers of America, and the Council of Churches to garner support for the PPC. In addition, Cleveland organizers planned several mass rallies with scheduled appearances by Dick Gregory, James Bevel, Eartha Kitt, and SNCC’s ousted radical

⁶⁴ “Georgia Field Report,” KL, SCLC, 179:4.

⁶⁵ “New Jersey Field Report,” KL, SCLC, 178:13.

leader, Stokely Carmichael⁶⁶ that proved to be the most productive way to gain attention and funds for the PPC. While organizers in Cleveland lined up notable activists and Hollywood stars to *mobilize* the black community, in Detroit, Benjamin Van Clarke stressed the need to *organize* by uniting with the masses, to “awaken them or raise their political consciousness and help them gradually to organize themselves voluntarily.”⁶⁷ Yet, even Van Clarke’s call for grassroots organizing was tinged with a paternalistic tone that reflected middle-class claims of knowing what poor people needed.

Many local poor were enthusiastic about the PPC, but some organizers were met with apathy or even outright resistance. A Virginia organizer complained in his progress report that after inviting 120 ministers for a meeting, none showed up due to their opposition to the campaign.⁶⁸ Southern ministers were not the only ones unsympathetic to the PPC. Boston organizer, Pierce Barker, explained to Hosea Williams that Boston’s black community viewed King unfavorably and was still reeling from the “minor sort of rebellion” during the summer of 1967, which had united the black community behind the more militant organizations. Meanwhile, local white liberals had turned their efforts and their money to anti-war activities.

SCLC’s experience in Chicago had left enthusiasm from that black community waning. As SCLC organizer Billy Hollins complained, “Our past work has affected the willingness of people to readily join an idea,” and only 400 registered to travel from Chicago to Washington. Like those in Boston, organizers in Chicago reached out to a

⁶⁶ “Ohio Field Report” KL, SCLC, 178:17.

⁶⁷ “Michigan Field Report” KL, SCLC, 178:7.

wide variety of groups and individuals for support, including colleges and seminaries, community organizations, welfare groups, businessmen, churches, unions, public relations, professional social workers, transplanted poor Southern whites, the growing Latino community, militant black organizations, peace activists, and suburban whites, producing an extremely diverse coalition.⁶⁹ The PPC provided local communities with a national event to rally around and united activists who had splintered into different areas and provided a way to mobilize nationally and organize locally.

Local activists organized poor people to go to Washington, while SCLC staff canvassed national organizations for volunteers to provide resources for the PPC. On March 13, the PPC received a significant endorsement when the YMCA issued a resolution in support of the campaign that declared:

Believing that the continuing blight of poverty in so affluent a nation as ours constitutes a clear denial of human dignity; and,
Deploing the fact that this poverty is the result of selfishness, neglect, indifference and prejudice that we as a nation have brought to bear; and,
Compelled and motivate by our religious convictions to bear witness to this American tragedy; and, reflecting upon our Christian responsibility to be relevant
...
We, the Executive Members of the Area Staff of the Central Atlantic Area Council of YMCAs, endorse and support the legitimate and moral aims and goals of the "Poor People's Campaign."⁷⁰

The YMCA, particularly its East Coast branches, also provided funding and donated resources for the PPC. The Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Washington YMCA pledged to cooperate with the local Health and Welfare Council, the Council of Churches

⁶⁸ "Virginia Field Report," KL, SCLC, 178:19. The organizer also complains that if he is going to continue to work for SCLC he needs more time and money, complaining about his mad "(and I do mean mad)" wife and his need to attend to his young child.

⁶⁹ "Illinois Field Report," KL, SCLC, 178:5.

of Greater Washington, and other local groups to “meet human needs and provide human services evolving from this ‘Campaign of the Poor.’”⁷¹ The PPC organizers had thousands of logistics to negotiate as they built support for transporting thousands of poor people to Washington and preparing accommodations for participants.

While SCLC staff were still debating specific goals, they had determined a tentative timetable for the PPC, which called for 300 people to leave New York City and march to Washington D.C., picking up additional participants en route until the group reached approximately 1,000. Another group of 1,000 would leave Baltimore for a four-day march to Washington. Two other caravans were expected to arrive from the west via Pittsburgh and from the South via Virginia. All of the caravans were expected to converge at the capital on May 2, where they would remain for an undisclosed time until the demands of guaranteed jobs or income were met. The original plans left out the Western half of the country because SCLC felt that participants would be unwilling to travel so far.

SCLC staff was responsible for recruiting fifty “marshals” from each state that would attend a training workshop in Atlanta, March 30-31. Each marshal would recruit ten more participants whom they would train in non-violent tactics and be responsible for during the journey to and from Washington and for the duration of their stay in D.C. After identifying local leaders and recruiting marshals, these local activists were

⁷⁰ “Resolution on the ‘Poor People’s Campaign,” March 13, 1968, Leo Marsh Papers, Box 2, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

⁷¹ YMCA of Metropolitan Washington, Urban Planning and Program Office, “A Resolution on the ‘Poor People’s Campaign’ Adopted by the Board of Directors, YMCA of Metropolitan Washington, March 26, 1968,” Leo Marsh Papers, Box 2, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

encouraged to rally support and funds from their local community. All funds activists raised had to be made payable to SCLC and sent directly to the Atlanta office. SCLC insisted that these funds would be earmarked for local activities, but local activists had to have approval from both Williams and SCLC's Executive Director, Mr. William Rutherford in order to disburse funds.⁷² Despite SCLC's control over the funds, Williams encouraged organizers to canvass the entire community. Jars for donations would be left at all supporting local businesses, and young men and women dressed with arm bands and gallon buckets would collect donations at intersections and in shopping centers. While Williams chastised professional people who, he argued, "will not march, go to jail, or to Washington," he insisted that they must contribute financially. Even though professionals had the greatest financial resources, SCLC put the most responsibility on local ministers who they argued were responsible for committing their churches to raising a certain amount of money, in addition to registering participants to go to Washington.

While attention was given to organizing the entire community, Williams stressed that the "Grass Root leaders and poor people are the most important element" and advised local activists to encourage poor people to bring both their questions and complaints to Dr. King. In each location, after meeting with locals in a mass rally, Dr. King would take a tour through an impoverished home or neighborhood. The instructions for organizers insisted that the poor should not be informed of Dr. King's visit because they would try "to clean up and dress up." SCLC made obvious attempts to stage media shots, suggesting that, "Doctor King should be allowed to shake hands with,

⁷² Letter from Hosea Williams, Director of Mobilization on March 5, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:3.

and hold many little children on his walk through the slums.” While SCLC instructed organizers to arrange these media displays, they advised activists to arrange only “closed (no press) meetings” between Dr. King and local Black Nationalists. Staging media events and hiding more controversial discussions exposed the type of mobilizing SCLC did that offended grassroots organizers who were interested in open and honest dialogue.⁷³

DISSENSION WITHIN THE RANKS

While the organization attempted to keep their squabbles with other groups and each other out of the press, SCLC embraced open and honest dialogue within its inner circle and welcomed advice from activists, academics, preachers, and grassroots people, alike. As local activists were mobilizing their communities, SCLC advisers were still debating the PPC’s target and demands.

Jewish activist and writer Arthur I. Waskow wrote to two key SCLC advisers, Tony Henry and Bill Moyer, and argued that the PPC should target specific powerful congressmen and the President. Waskow suggested that the PPC could make a few individuals feel real pressure by “keeping the screw to those guys—camp-ins at their houses, ‘hauntings,’ visits to their offices, etc.” Other suggestions included a community police-patrols, rent strikes, sit-downs to resist evictions, and sit-ins at settlement houses. Waskow also complained that the current tone of the Campaign would not appeal to young local militants and that tactics directed towards this group should be employed, such as marching from the local draft boards to the Employment Service “to make clear

⁷³ Memo from Hosea Williams: “Mobilization of Your Community” April 28, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:5.

they want lively jobs in America, not death in Vietnam.”⁷⁴ Doing so, Waskow argued, would provide creative alternatives to rioting for frustrated inner-city residents and would involve Washington, D.C. as a community rather than simply attacking government institutions that happened to be there.⁷⁵

While Waskow worried that the PPC would be too moderate, King still had dissension among his own ranks, with some arguing that the PPC would be too militant. On March 8, 1968, long-time SCLC staff member Marion Logan circulated a memorandum to every member of the SCLC board challenging the potential of the PPC.⁷⁶ Logan recounts her feelings at the time:

I was really very apprehensive. I thought that as it began to develop, as I heard about how it was developing, it was becoming much too big and unwieldy for us to be able to handle. And also, considering the tenor of the times, I wasn't sure that we could be a success . . . The bringing of poor people to the seat of government was like throwing it in their faces, and I don't think too many of the officialdom of Washington was gonna take that with any great grace.⁷⁷

King did everything within his power to change Logan's mind and discourage her from criticizing the campaign among other SCLC staff, but Logan persisted.

SCLC also received advice from economist Donna Allen who argued that the guaranteed income approach was “wrong politically, economically, and strategically, and cannot achieve what the poor people are coming for.” Allen complained that similar proposals had been under assault in Congress for quite some time, and that this approach would have little effect on improving inadequate education, housing, and health care and would stigmatize those receiving aid as “rejects of the economic system” who the

⁷⁴ “Memo from Arthur I. Waskow to Tony Henry and Bill Moyer” KL, SCLC, 179:3.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Fairclough, 369.

government would ignore after dishing out their income. She suggested that without a reduction of the military budget, the plan was not even feasible, explaining that, “the \$20 billion deficit is real—even with a tax increase—and so are the economic pressures from abroad to restrict not expand the American economy.” Allen argued that by asking for anything the campaign would place poor people’s needs on the government’s terms. Rather than making demands, Allen proposed that poor people establish themselves as a political force by spending their time in Washington discussing their needs and educating one another about how the political and economic systems function. SCLC would embrace this idea, in part, through the Poor People’s University located within Resurrection City. Allen predicted that if the PPC ignored the press and government, journalists would seek out PPC leaders who could clearly explain the problems of poverty and the purpose of the campaign rather having participants and PPC leadership shove it down the government and public’s throats.⁷⁸ While some staff opposed the plans for the demonstration and the government and press expressed both fear and contempt for the PPC,⁷⁹ there were other signs of interest and enthusiasm for escalated anti-poverty efforts.

There was widespread support for anti-poverty campaigns at this point. The Director of the Peace Corps asked businesses to have their college recruits dedicate two

⁷⁷ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 455.

⁷⁸ See Memorandum to Staff, Poor People’s Campaign from Donna Allen, “A Proposal Regarding the Demands of the Poor People’s Campaign,” KL, SCLC, 179:5.

⁷⁹ See Milton Viorst, “Martin Luther King Intends to Tie the City in Knots this Spring” *Washingtonian* (February 1968) KL, SCLC, 179:19. This article actually suggests that the press and government hadn’t taken King’s plans seriously enough, with the author warning, “Don’t pass the challenge off lightly. It’s a nonviolent but drastic attempt by black moderates to get jobs and income now.”

years of voluntary service to programs helping the poor,⁸⁰VISTA workers sent letters to President Johnson attempting to persuade him to divert funds from the war effort to anti-poverty programs, and Senator Robert Kennedy criticized Johnson's efforts in curbing poverty in the Appalachians after witnessing conditions in Kentucky and joined in urging Johnson to divert funds from the war for anti-poverty programs.⁸¹Other elected officials proposed more limited solutions to the poverty problem. The Presidential National Advisory Committee on Civil disorders issued the Kerner Commission Report in March of 1968, which echoed King's warning that the nation was becoming dangerously fractured and recommended a long-range approach to ensuring a guaranteed minimum income for all individuals and families.⁸² Even a group of Republican Congressman urged that \$2.5 billion of the savings from the \$6.5 billion proposed budget cut go towards "human renewal,"⁸³and a bipartisan group of Senators proposed a bill that would provide \$200 million for anti-poverty summer programs in large cities.⁸⁴ Private organizations like the Ford Foundation joined in the fight against poverty by awarding twenty-three grants that totaled in \$3.2 billion for anti-poverty programs. But Congress failed to embrace any of these proposed solutions.⁸⁵ On March 11, as the Senate was voting on the final passage of the 1968 civil rights bill before sending it off to the House, King met with his research committee, including Michael Harrington, Barbara Moffett of

⁸⁰ *The New York Times*, February 14, 1968.

⁸¹ *The New York Times*, February 15, 1968.

⁸² See Kerner Commission Report for more details on the Commissions proposals. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1968).

⁸³ *The New York Times*, March 7, 1968.

⁸⁴ *The New York Times*, March 12, 1968.

⁸⁵ *The New York Times*, March 8, 1968.

American Friends Service Committee, and Stanley Levison, to clarify and finalize the plans for the campaign. In the coming months, SCLC's focus would splinter as King worked to forge a broad-based multiracial coalition and joined a local workers' movement in Memphis.

CONCLUSION

While Stokely Carmichael touted local organizing as the most authentic form of protest, both mobilizing and organizing were necessary to move a nation to protest poverty. SCLC built a national anti-poverty movement, and in the process, inspired, revived, or bolstered local grassroots movements. These local movements mobilized support for the PPC and organized local poor people to go to Washington, but they also protested local issues and used the media attention to highlight local problems. The PPC's initial mass meetings illustrated the common problems poor people across the nation faced. The images of hunger amid prosperity, whether received from the media, policy makers, or witnessed first-hand, served as a driving force behind King's vision for the PPC and the public support that was necessary to sustain the movement. In addition to organizing local poor people, SCLC faced the challenge of engendering middle-class support and funding for the PPC, and exposing the hunger that existed in a rich nation was one way to mobilize people and resources. The other challenge SCLC faced was forming a broad-based coalition. The following chapter explores the early formation of the PPC's multi-racial coalition at their first meeting in Atlanta and the formation of the Committee of 100, and chronicles the first of three waves of caravans to the capital—the Committee's lobbying campaign.

PART 2

Poverty & Mobility: The Caravans to the Capital

While poverty scholars have given immense attention to class, race, and gender inequalities, outside of the field of cultural geography, far less has been written about spatial and regional identity and how one's geographical and spatial locations affect one's economic status.¹ Geographers Richard L. Morrill and Ernest H. Wohlenberg, writing about poverty in 1971, declared that the regional diversity of poverty required both national and regional poverty programs.² The Poor People's Campaign was the first national anti-poverty campaign that addressed both local and national issues that affected all of the different groups involved, as well as the specific needs of groups in different regions and from various ethno-racial backgrounds. The PPC's various caravans to the capital demonstrate how regional diversity shaped the participants' experiences, how mobility functioned as a form of political resistance, and how the PPC operated simultaneously—locally, regionally, and nationally. It did so by organizing local

¹ One history of poverty that recognizes the importance of space, place, and mobility is Jacqueline Jones' *The Dispossessed*, which chronicles and compares the experiences of poor southern whites and blacks, revealing how one's location in a rural versus urban or Southern versus Northeastern setting largely determined the causes and extent of one's poverty. See Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclass From the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

² See Richard L. Morrill and Ernest H. Wohlenberg, *The Geography of Poverty in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 55. While the reasons for the regional diversity of poverty are harder to identify, since an area's resources did not necessarily dictate its economic success and broader socioeconomic changes occurred at different rates and to various degrees in different places, the causes for rural versus urban poverty are clearer. As the nation urbanized during the first half of the 20th century, the space one occupied began to affect one's economic status perhaps even more than one's race or gender, although these factors ultimately remain inseparable. Morrill and Wohlenberg argue that rural poverty was the result of the areas' inability to attract business at the same time agricultural mechanized, while urban poverty was more the result of structural economic and social problems, requiring both national and regional responses to remedy two related but different problems.

community support for the PPC, uniting regional and ethno-racial representatives of the poor, and constructing a display of poverty on the National Mall as participants rallied at government institutions. The participants' physical mobility enabled them to expose local poverty as the regional caravans transported the participants and transformed their regional and local interests into part of a national campaign. Throughout, the PPC and its caravans prompted renewed local and national conversations about poverty.

In his most recent work, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, cultural geographer Tim Cresswell defines mobility as “socially produced motion,” a social construction, much like race, class, gender, sexuality, and place. He identifies three relational moments through which mobility can be understood. First, mobility can be defined simply as physical movement. But for Cresswell, mobility also serves as a site for ideological representations that often exhibit conflicting meanings that vary according to the race, gender, or class of the person in motion: “Mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity, and as modernity, sit side by side with mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance.”³ Along with being an expression of physical movement and producing contradictory representations, Cresswell defines mobility as “a way of being in the world,” and “an irreducibly embodied experience.”⁴ As a cultural geographer, Cresswell's interest lies in how mobility is experienced and represented and the interaction between these bodily expressions and representations of mobility.

The caravans provided participants with a dual opportunity for both pleasure and protest. The ephemeral feeling one gains when traveling—removing one's self from

³ Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

one's normal routine and place and moving through both time and space in an atypical way—greatly contributed to the unity that was needed for the PPC to work. The caravans gave participants a chance to get to know one another, which was essential since many participants had never worked with people of different races, with those from other regions, or with activists who held diverse political perspectives. Many participants had never left their home state, so a free trip to Washington made joining the PPC seem like a good opportunity, not to mention the fact that participants would receive three square meals a day, shelter, clothing, medical care, and many other social services during their stay in Washington. The caravans also provided participants with access to elected officials and a chance to air their grievances directly.

Part two employs Cresswell's definition of mobility and frames of use to better understand how movement becomes mobility, how "movement is made meaningful"⁵ by analyzing three stages of movement in the Poor People's Campaign. Although each of these caravans produced mobility in each of its three relational forms, the three different groups of caravans had different emphases. The Minority Meeting in Atlanta and the Committee of 100's trip to the capital were significant not for the physical movement across the country but for the end effect—gaining access to one another and to government representatives. While all of the participants in the PPC experienced mobility as "a way of being in the world," interviews with participants on the nine regional caravans demonstrate that what happened along their journey and the unity that traveling for days together inspired was more important than what happened once the caravans

⁴ Cresswell, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

reached their final destination in Resurrection City. The Mule Train's use of nineteenth-century style transportation to travel from Marks, Mississippi, to the capital serves as an excellent example of mobility as a form of representation. The Mule Train was a symbolic protest of the limits on poor people's mobility—both physical and economic, as well as a performance of poverty that not only awakened spectators along the way to the purpose of the PPC, but also displayed the determination and will of poor people to protest their condition. All of these caravans reveal how mobility both constructs and represents ideologies about race, class, gender, region, politics, and power, particularly in terms of access to space, place, and capital. The caravans served as moving political theaters that enabled participants to perform their poverty for the nation and challenged popular stereotypes of the poor.

As the following chapters reveal, the caravans were an essential component of the PPC that linked the movement at these different scales. The Minority Meeting and the Committee of 100 and its lobbying caravan provided the national groundwork for the campaign, connecting different ethno-racial groups and presenting the government with the PPC's initial demands. The regional caravans demonstrated to people from various ethno-racial backgrounds, religions, and political perspectives that many of their problems were connected to where they lived and the historical economic developments in their region. Interviews with Mule Train participants from Marks, Mississippi, demonstrate how the PPC affected one Delta community and how taking their concerns to Washington affected Marks residents. The PPC caravans enabled people from the poorest cities and towns in the nation both to take their demands directly to the seat of government and to confront the white power structure in their local communities.

CHAPTER THREE

The Committee of 100: Caravanning the Capital, Lobbying Washington

“The other thing I want you to understand is this. That it didn't cost the nation one penny to integrate lunch counters. It didn't cost the nation one penny to guarantee the right to vote. But now we are dealing with issues that cannot be solved without the nation spending billions of dollars and undergoing a radical redistribution of economic power.”¹ -Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Looking back, I can see that it marked the emergence of a broad-based progressive coalition: poor people who were black, white, brown, and red; religious leaders; union leaders; peace activists. Jobs, peace, and freedom would be linked, sustained through a loose shifting, but persistent coalition of organizations. Among the people gathered were some who would go on to head organizations and become members of Congress and elected officials from small Southern communities.”²

-Andrew Young

“The Poor People’s Campaign, like most social movements, relied on the willing participation and close collaboration of many groups and individuals. They operated under dispersed, coordinated leadership who brought nuanced, if not contradictory, understandings and substantial egos to goals, strategies, roles, and relationships. And the leader who could have most effectively harmonized the differences and managed the messages, Dr. King, was suddenly ripped from his key role in the midst of final planning.”³

-Roland Freeman

The image of poverty morphed from white to black during the mid-1960s, and by the late 1960s the media expanded its focus to include different minority groups in their reports on poverty. Paul H. Douglas’s *In Our Time* argued that an anti-poverty campaign focused exclusively on blacks was sure to fail and that other minorities resented the presumed preferential treatment War on Poverty programs gave blacks:

In New York City the Puerto Ricans, whether their color be dark or light, have felt neglected by the concentration of effort upon the Negroes. In the Southwest

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., “The Promised Land 1967-1968,” *Eyes on the Prize II Part 4* (Alexandria, VA: Blackside Productions, 1990).

² Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: the Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 488.

³ Roland Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 132.

the Mexican-Americans are probably the most neglected among the poor. And it is important not to slight poor whites such as those from the Appalachians.⁴

A 1967 *U.S. News and World Report* article, “Forgotten Men: The Poor Whites”

attempted to refocus the nation’s attention to poor whites, demonstrating that 69% of the nation’s poor were white, as well as 85% of U.S. farm families who made up 46% of the poor.⁵ In a 1967 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Helen Rowan reported on another dismissed

group in “A Minority Nobody Knows.” Rowan provided statistics and studies on

Mexican Americans in urban center and described this group as:

... worse off in every respect than the nonwhites (Negroes, Indians, and Orientals), not to mention the dominant Anglos (everybody else). They are poorer, their housing is more crowded and more dilapidated, their unemployment rate is higher, their average educational level is lower.⁶

What Rowan found most extraordinary was not that this poverty existed but that the public was completely ignorant of this group’s plight. While Chicano historians and social scientists increasingly challenged this neglect, Mexican American activists demanded action. The media apparently ignored American Indians, statistically the poorest of the poor. One way for the minority poor to gain visibility was to form alliances with black activists whom the media represented on a daily basis, although in increasingly negative terms.

⁴ Paul H. Douglas’ *In Our Time* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1968), 140-141. Douglas comments on the low level of participation of poor whites in the PPC.

⁵ “Forgotten Men: The Poor Whites” *U.S. News and World Report*, Nov. 27, 1967.

⁶ Helen Rowan, “A Minority Nobody Knows” *The Atlantic Monthly* (1967): 47-52. Journalists were not the only ones to bemoan the neglect of impoverished Mexican Americans. Frank G. Mittleback and Grace Marshall decry that their UCLA sponsored *Mexican-American Study Project: “The Burden of Poverty,”* was the only comprehensive study of poverty among Mexican Americans. Mittleback and Marshall demonstrated the ways in which segregation had perpetuated poverty among all minorities and they concurred with Rowan that Mexican American families were poorer than any other group. They proposed that more studies should be done,

Chapter three considers the first meeting of this fragile yet profound multiracial, regionally diverse coalition. While SCLC originally intended to organize only in the Eastern portion of the U.S., Chicano and American Indian leaders' interest in joining the campaign transformed the PPC into a truly national movement. The Minority Meeting in March of 1968 was not only revolutionary for the times as a multiracial coalition dedicated to eradicating poverty, the Meeting was also a profound occasion because it provided national leaders from various ethno-racial groups a chance to convene with one another. As Andrew Young suggests in the opening quotation, chapter three argues that this meeting, and the PPC as a whole, laid the groundwork for a broad, multiracial, national coalition of radical activists. The contacts activists acquired and friendships and alliances formed in Atlanta, along the caravans to the capital, and in Washington, D.C. provided much of the groundwork for the burgeoning Chicano and American Indian movements.

SCLC was committed to having poor people in leadership positions with equal representation from all the different groups involved, so each group elected representatives who joined SCLC staff and leadership as the Committee of 100, the advance lobby caravan for the PPC. Chapter three chronicles this group's caravan through the capital and their presentation of demands to various government agencies as the opening stage of the PPC. Scholars who have studied the PPC have virtually ignored this stage of the movement, yet it was a significant and necessary component.⁷ King and

expressing their faith in the power of statistics to shape policy and represent the public's attitudes. See Mittleback and Marshall, vii.

⁷ Fager and McKnight each address the Committee of 100 on only a page or so. See Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*; McKnight, *The Last Crusade*. Roland Freeman provides the most

SCLC leaders recognized that they could not just show up on the government's doorsteps with demands and, therefore, approached the campaign in a similar framework as their revolutionary predecessors. They petitioned their government for wrongs done and gave the officials a chance to respond to their demands before escalating their protest, mimicking the nation's founding documents, particularly the Declaration of Independence.

The Committee of 100's presentation of demands was significant for two reasons. It gave the PPC's participants a chance to spell out in detail their grievances and demands and established a tactical and moral framework for the PPC. While the government, the press, and many Washington residents perceived the approaching caravans and impending camp-in as a threat, an assault on the capital city, the lobbying caravan presented the PPC's demands in a restrained, formal manner. But while SCLC tried to mimic the form of politics lobbyists practiced on a daily basis, the Committee of 100 was not made up of typical lobbyists. Writing in response to the release of the President's Commission on Civil Disorders, King declared:

“The commissions report is a physician's warning of approaching death with a prescription to life. The duty of every American is to administer the remedy without regard for the cost and without delay. Eloquence and analysis by themselves do not bring change. Better experience has shown that our government does not act until it is confronted directly and militantly.”⁸

comprehensive discussion, which is still brief. His photographs of the Committee do a great deal to communicate the group's experience. See Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*.

⁸ SCLC Press Release, “Dr. King Calls For Action Against Poverty and Racism Cited in Riot Study; Poor People's Campaign Starts April 22 in Washington,” March 4, 1968, KL, SCLC 122:10.

King envisioned the Committee of 100's lobbying caravan as a formal negotiation with the government before escalating the PPC into a movement of mass civil disobedience throughout the capital. This chapter argues that while the Committee of 100 presented themselves as a legitimate lobbying group, often the style of the participants' presentations became the focus rather than the substance of their demands. Government officials tended to perceive the visits as threats rather than rational meetings to discuss serious societal problems. This chapter explores how the identities of these anti-poverty advocates affected the government's responses to their demands, and the racial and class ideologies at play as the multiracial coalition confronted typically white, male government officials.

THE MINORITY MEETING

In February of 1968 SCLC sent out a call to representatives of other ethno-racial groups to mobilize support and acquire commitments for participation in the PPC. King reached out to black nationalists,⁹ formed a coalition with New Left and anti-war protestors,¹⁰ and for the first time, met with American Indian representatives, leaders of the burgeoning Chicano movement, and poor whites from Appalachia.¹¹ Andrew Young recounts that SCLC was "happily surprised at the positive response from Cesar Chavez

⁹ *The New York Times*, February 23, 1968.

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, March 26, 1968.

¹¹ See Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 273, 275; Arturo Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston: Arte Public Press, University of Houston, 1997): 167, 179, 192; Ernesto B. Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice: Chicano Militancy and the Government's War on Dissent* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 54-63. See Paul Chatt Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like A Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz and Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 58-59.

and the California Farm Workers, groups in the Appalachians, and Native Americans.”¹²

While most of the other groups invited were excited about the new alliance, some PPC workers were hostile to working alongside other groups. One confessed his reservations about a multiracial coalition, declaring: “I do not think I am at the point where a Mexican can sit in and call strategy on a Steering Committee;” while another revealed the power dynamics at play, patronizingly suggesting that Chicano leader Reies Lopez Tijerina “didn’t understand that we were the parents and he was the child.”¹³

Throughout the PPC representatives from the various groups competed with one another to have their group’s needs prioritized, but they were united in their desire to combat the dominant issues of racial discrimination and economic exploitation.

Forming a national, multi-racial movement of the poor was no easy task. The first real involvement of Mexican Americans, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites took place at the Minority Meeting, held in Atlanta on March 14. While SCLC had plenty of connections with both middle-class, liberal white organizations and a wide range of black organizations across the country, the organization had virtually no experience working with other minority groups and poor whites. Tom Houck was the SCLC staff member assigned responsibility for recruiting other minority participants. His first task was to track down other groups and activists interested in joining the coalition. Houck obtained lists from New York-based religious groups like the United Church of Christ, the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and the American Friend’s Service Committee, and reached out to radicals through the anti-

¹² See Young, 445; Cesar Chavez did not participate in the PPC because he was conducting his hunger strike in support of California farm workers during the summer of 1968.

war Spring Mobilization Committee. He also called on black social workers, social service agencies, OEO projects, and CAP programs to help him identify minority leaders for the anti-poverty campaign. SCLC mailed out over 4,000 brochures briefly detailing the plans for the PPC to these organizations and their members.¹⁴ The organization also paid for forty percent of the participants' travel expenses, with the total conference costing approximately \$5,000. Houck sent telegrams under Dr. King's name to Chicano leaders Reies Tijerina, Corky Gonzales, Cesar Chavez, and to Indian representatives, such as Davy Youngblood and Pam Coe, National Representative of the American Indian Program.

Coe provided SCLC with a list of organizations that might support the PPC, which included the National Indian Youth Council (whose sitting president was Clyde Warrior), the National Congress of American Indians, the United Scholarship Service (directed by Tillie Walker), the American Indian Historical Society, and the Association on American Indian Affairs, which Coe noted was "pretty much a white outfit but the biggest agency in the field by far." She expressed her enthusiasm for the PPC but urged SCLC to hold the Minority Meeting either in Chicago or Denver rather than Atlanta, since the other locations were more centrally located.¹⁵ But since SCLC had decided basically to ignore the West Coast, assuming that it was too far for people to travel from to D.C., the meeting remained set in Atlanta.

¹³ Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 607.

¹⁴ Tom Houck, interviewed by Katherine Shannon, 7/10/1968, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, Moorland Springarn Research Center, Howard University (Hereafter, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project).

¹⁵ Letter from Pam Coe to Tom Houck, March 1, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:18.

The enthusiasm for the PPC among the leaders of the burgeoning Chicano movement eventually transformed the campaign into a truly national affair, but organizing even among this group was a challenge. The information SCLC staff obtained on the various Latino groups revealed the fractures in the growing movement. SCLC reported that Corky Gonzalez's Denver-based Crusade for Justice and other "militant Spanish groups" considered the Spanish Speaking Committee, headed by Rev. Miguel F. Barragon, to be "sell-outs" to the system." Yet both groups pledged to support the PPC, and Gonzalez capitalized on the Minority Meeting as a chance to convince the Bishop's Committee to allow his Crusade for Justice to use its church contacts and Catholic centers for movement activities. SCLC also sought the help of Reies Lopez Tijerina who King had met with in Chicago in 1967, despite his recent involvement in guerilla warfare with police in New Mexico after Tijerina and his Alianza seized one of the contested land grants, Tierra Amarilla. Tijerina was the first to reply that he would attend, and when the *Albuquerque Journal* condemned his participation in the PPC, he responded by boasting:

"I am taking part in the poor people's march because from the beginning it was I who began the coalition philosophy between the brown and the black people and the Indian people and the good whites. So the fact that the Indians and Spanish Americans are taking part in the poor people's march in Washington is proof that I've been interested in unity of all people and justice for all people."¹⁶

Tijerina remained the dominant leader among the Chicano contingent because Cesar Chavez, the most nationally known Chicano leader, had to decline from participating because he was busy conducting a hunger strike on behalf of farm workers.

¹⁶ Patricia Bell Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants: Mexican Americans in Struggle for Their Heritage* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 114.

While Chicano leaders in the Southwest were eager to join the PPC and utilize the meetings to embolden their local efforts, the Chicago-based Latin American Defense Organization (LADO) was more skeptical about working with SCLC. After witnessing SCLC's failure to maintain communication with Chicago organizations after they left defeated in 1967, LADO activists worried that decisions would be "made from the top down" and that activists would be exploited "only as physical bodies for massive action under SCLC's banner."¹⁷ While Chicago-based Latinos remained skeptical of SCLC due to previous experiences, other Chicago activists embraced the campaign.

To locate poor white representatives, SCLC turned to Dovie Coleman, an NWRO organizer who had been organizing poor whites and Puerto Ricans in Southern Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee, and who was now based in Uptown, a very active diverse working-class Chicago neighborhood. They also reached out to former ERAP organizer Tom Hayden, who had broken with SDS and remained skeptical about SCLC's tactics, but who provided his contacts with poor whites in the area. Doug Blakey of the National Community Union, an outgrowth of JOIN—Jobs Or Income Now—was instrumental in organizing Appalachian whites through community unions, co-ops, and tenant unions, and for recruiting southern white students.¹⁸

The diverse representation and the structure of the Minority Meeting spoke to the potential of multi-racial organizing on a small scale. The group was quite diverse with approximately twelve American Indians, fifteen Mexican Americans, ten Puerto Ricans, fifteen to twenty poor whites, and ten to fifteen people who had worked in anti-poverty

¹⁷ "Spanish Americans, KL, SCLC 180:5.

¹⁸ Letter from Tom Houck to William Rutherford, April 20, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:20.

campaigns in attendance, along with the SCLC staff. Several of the invited guests spoke on behalf of their communities, including Grace Moore Newman for Puerto Ricans and Reies Tijerina for Mexican-Americans, followed by a general discussion opened to all participants. After a break, the groups reconvened in ethnic caucuses: the Spanish-American Caucus, which included the Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans, the American Indian caucus, the black caucus, and the poor white caucus. All of the caucuses were open to all participants so everyone could exchange ideas to better understand one another's perspectives.

After the different caucuses had a chance to elect representatives, the group reconvened and formed a steering committee that included representatives from all of the minority groups, dividing the leadership equally among the different groups. The NWRO, which was heavily represented at the meeting, came to represent black interests. The Mexican-American contingent elected Tijerina and Gonzales as their representatives, Grace Moore Newman and Haleong Balentine represented the Puerto Ricans, Peggy Terry and Bob Fulcher worked on behalf of poor whites, and the Indians elected Tillie Walker and Mel Tom, with Father Berrigan serving as an alternate for all groups. Despite the attempts to have equal leadership representation, the financial contributions came mostly from the efforts of Tillie Walker, Father Berrigan, and the American Friends Services Committee.

While Houck complained that it was difficult to convince SCLC's staff that the multi-racial coalition was worth the financial cost of bringing these other groups into the campaign, others were thrilled about the possibilities of the PPC as a symbol of things to come. Houck reminisced that, "the spirit of the day was one of excitement. The spirit of

the day was that success was about to come off, and the poor people's campaign would make history. It would be the first campaign ever to involve in this country, today, the poor of all ethnic groupings."¹⁹ The day after the meeting, SCLC released a notice interestingly titled "Black and White Together," that announced, "AMERICAN INDIANS, POOR WHITES, SPANISH-AMERICANS JOIN POOR PEOPLE'S WASHINGTON CAMPAIGN." The SCLC press release declared the gathering a "historic meeting of American minority group leaders," and cited King's declaration of the meeting as "'a highly significant event, the beginning of a new co-operation, understanding, and a determination by poor people of all colors and backgrounds to assert and win their right to a decent life and respect for their culture and dignity.'"²⁰

In order to spread the message of the PPC and mobilize support from local communities, the notice announced that King was about to set off on a nationwide tour. After touring the Mississippi Delta and small towns and cities throughout Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia between March 19-25, King would head north for appearances in New York, Newark, Baltimore, Washington, and Virginia. After stopping in key spots in South Carolina and North Carolina, King was supposed to wrap up his trip in the Midwest in mid-April, with stops in Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago. While King would never see his tour through to its end, he made a significant appearance in Los Angeles just days after the Minority Meeting in Atlanta. While there he met with local black grassroots activists and traveled to Delano to meet with Cesar Chavez. While Chavez declared his support for the PPC, he remained committed to his hunger strike in support

¹⁹ Tom Houck Interview.

²⁰ SCLC, "Black and White Together," KL, King Papers, 34:15.

of the local struggle of the migrant farm workers, at this point in its twenty-fifth day, rather than pledging to go to Washington as the leading representative of the PPC's Chicano contingent.

After his trip to the West Coast, King made an unexpected detour to Memphis, Tennessee, where he delivered a speech on March 18 proposing a general strike to protest the city's lack of response after two black workers were killed on the job, as well as years of inadequate pay, racial discrimination, and patronizing labor practices. Reverend James Lawson—an old friend of King's, the premier champion of non-violence, and a long-time advocate for the poor and workers' rights in Memphis—asked King to make an appearance in support of the striking workers. Despite protests from his staff, King joined the movement, insisting that this campaign was emblematic of the larger issues the PPC was addressing, and that it provided an opportunity to support this local campaign while promoting the national movement. On April 1, SCLC released a notice to its staff explaining “the Memphis situation” and how it related to plans for the PPC, especially after violence broke out on King-led march on March 25 in Memphis, which received considerable negative press. The notice declared, “We did not cause violence in Memphis. Oppressive conditions in that city, similar to those throughout the country, caused the violence. The issue at stake is not violence vs. nonviolence but **POVERTY AND RACISM.**” The declaration from SCLC's executive staff insisted, “We cannot ignore the clear-cut situation that exists in Memphis. It is a smaller version of what we're going to Washington for. It concerns jobs and poverty and racism and a community that

wants to correct all three.”²¹ The staff explained that they would pursue additional organizing and marches in Memphis and that doing so did not in any way affect the plans for the PPC.

Unfortunately, King and SCLC could not foresee the dramatic way in which their involvement in the Memphis campaign would come to shape the PPC, the civil rights movement, and the nation as a whole. On April 3, 1968, King returned to Memphis to lead a second march to prove that the Memphis activists could remain non-violent. That evening he delivered one of his most passionate speeches to a rousing crowd at the Mason Temple. In this address, now known as the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, King responded to the injunction preventing the striking workers to protest after the violent incident on the first march, declaring,

All we say to America is, "Be true to what you said on paper." If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of the press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right. And so just as I say, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. We are going on.²²

King would not live to participate in the next march in Memphis. At the end of the speech, with eerie foresight, King insisted that the movement was bigger than him, and that if he were not to make the movement must live on. He proclaimed:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I

²¹ Tom Offenburger, “The Memphis Situation and the Poor People’s Campaign,” (CONFIDENTIAL, NOT FOR PUBLICATION) April 1, 1968, KL, SCLC, 129:10.

²² Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, April, 3, 1968, quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., “The Promised Land 1967-1968,” *Eyes on the Prize II Part 4* (Alexandria, VA: Blackside Productions, 1990).

don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.²³

The following evening, James Earl Ray assassinated Dr. King outside his hotel room at the Lorraine Motel, which has since been transformed into a civil rights museum and was to serve as the launching pad for the Poor People's Campaign in the wake of its creator's demise.

While King's assassination shook the nation and transformed the movement, the civil rights movement did not end with its most recognized leader's death, but King's assassination did make activists pause and reflect on their goals. Myles Horton, head of the Highlander Folk School wrote to Andrew Young and Cesar Chavez and expressed his optimism about the PPC after the success of the Minority Meeting in Atlanta. In a letter dated April 5, 1968 but transcribed days earlier, Horton declared:

I believe we caught a glimpse of the future at the March 14th meeting called by SCLC. We had there in Atlanta . . . the making of a bottom-up coalition, as I tried to impress on you and Martin as you were leaving for the airport. I realize all of you have been extremely busy, but I hope you have been considering the possibility of broadening the Washington Poor People's Campaign to encourage autonomous activities of the Mexican-Americans and other poor groups. This, as you know, would require not only sharing of planning, but sharing of publicity where the mass media will be primarily concerned with SCLC . . . This could lay the groundwork for something tremendously exciting and significant . . . No other organization has this opportunity and therefore this responsibility.²⁴

In a footnote, Horton confronted the reality of sending this response on April 5 and what this meant for the movement's future: "I am too numbed by Martin's death to think

²³ King, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

clearly and I am sending [the letter] as dictated in the hopes that you who are his heirs may still find these ideas of some value. We now face a great void. The lights are dim in my world today.”²⁵

King’s assassination in Memphis on April 4 temporarily postponed plans for the PPC, but SCLC felt committed to realizing his vision. In the wake of his death, donations and pledges of support for the movement poured into SCLC’s office. On April 11, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom issued an action bulletin in support of the PPC, which maintained that all Americans were implicated in King’s death, declaring, “We, too, are guilty of murder. It is time for the American people to repent and make democracy equally applicable to all Americans. What can we do?” The women’s activist organization outlined several specific things citizens could do to assuage their guilt, such as supporting the pending Civil Rights Bill of 1968 and the recommendations presented in the Kerner Commission’s report, opposing the Safe Streets and Crime Control bill, and organizing locally for the PPC.²⁶ That same day, the Board of Directors of the American Civil Liberties Union issued a resolution declaring that they shared “with all men of goodwill a profound sense of tragedy in the assassination of Martin Luther King. We mourn the loss of a great American and world leader in the cause of human rights.”²⁷ The National Urban League echoed these

²⁴ Letter from Miles Horton to Andrew Young, KL, SCLC, 177:20.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, “Poor People’s Campaign,” Action Bulletin No. 8 (April, 11, 1968), American Civil Liberties Union Washington, D. C. Office Records, Box 6, Folder 10, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

²⁷ Algernon Black, “Resolution of the Board of Directors [of the ACLU] on the Death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” April 11, 1968, American Civil Liberties Union Washington, D. C. Office Records, Box 6, Folder 10, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

organizations in their support for the PPC, although the group was not involved in planning the campaign. The NUL's Whitney Young, chastised the government, declaring that, "Despite the brutal assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., despite the riots that were its direct result, despite the urgent warnings of the President's Commission on Civil Disorders, Congress has continued to turn its back on the just demands of the dispossessed."²⁸ While activist organizations pledged their support for the PPC and their sympathy in the wake of King's death, African Americans and the poor of all races released their disappointment, despair, sadness, and rage over the death of their leader on the city streets, as riots swept the nations in the week after King's assassination. The media, the government, and the public waited anxiously to hear where the movement was headed.

On April 19 Reverend Abernathy announced that the Poor People's Campaign would continue as a tribute to Dr. King but would postpone its kickoff from April 22 to May 14. SCLC staff member Ernest Austin reflected back on the brief break after King's death and declared, "I don't think the campaign was ever in doubt for a moment. I think the [staff] retreat was basically therapy for a lot of people had been working extremely hard at the time."²⁹ The reprieve was brief since Campaign Steering Committee met at SCLC's Washington headquarters on U Street on Saturday April 27 to finalize the campaign demands and strategize for the Committee of 100s confrontations with government officials on April 29-30.

²⁸ Whitney M. Young, "Statement on the Poor People's March," April 4, 1968, American Civil Liberties Union Washington, D. C. Office Records, Box 6, Folder 10, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

After riots swept the nation in the wake of King's assassination, enthusiasm for the PPC increased dramatically. Tom Houck reported to William Rutherford on April 20, that the American Friends Service Committee had agreed to assist the various minority groups with travel expenses and resources for the caravans to D.C. The AFSC generously provided funds for busses to carry about 1,000 Mexican-Americans from the Southwest, for food, lodging, and transportation for approximately 100 American Indians traveling from Washington state, transportation for approximately 300 Indians from Cherokee tribes in Oklahoma and various tribes from North Dakota. Funding was always welcome, but Roland Freeman, renowned photographer who documented the Mule Train, recognized the enthusiasm for the campaign as a mixed blessing. Freeman argued that while King's "death provided a starting point for coalitions and for developing mutual trust and common agendas," the increased interest meant that many who joined the movement were not trained in nonviolent philosophy and tactics.³⁰ The other noticeable effect of King's assassination was that many were becoming increasingly angry and militant. Houck recounted how three sisters who were SCLC staff members reacted to King's death: "Cookie, Francis, and Mildred Smith; they had all worn straight hair prior to this time . . . I came back the next day—they all had their hair cut and shaped in an Afro . . . they were becoming more powerfully proud of their blackness and with what they had."³¹ While King's assassination transformed many on a personal level, others recognized the transformations it signaled for the nation as a whole. One PPC

²⁹ Ernest Austin interviewed by Katherine Shannon 7/9/68, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #264.

³⁰ Freeman, 90.

³¹ Tom Houck Interview.

participant, Murdock Benjamin, explained that he saw King's death as "a turning point in the movement." He believed "there wouldn't be no more sit-in movements or nothing. And that everybody was going to turn militant . . . And that riots would be common place and an everyday thing."³² Riots did erupt nationwide after King's death, but the loss of the leader did not signal the end of the civil rights movement.

King's death did, however, signal a total rejection of reform for many blacks. A woman interviewed on the street about her reaction to the assassination labeled it as "the final and total rejection on the part of the establishment of black people approaching the establishment on its own terms."³³ Even King had his final word on the issue of reform versus revolution. *Look* magazine posthumously published an article of King's on April 14, 1968. As riots erupted across the nation in response to his demise, King's words reminded Americans that "to end poverty, to extirpate prejudice, to free a tormented conscience, to make a tomorrow of justice, fair play and creativity—all these are worthy of the American ideal" but warned his audience that the PPC was the last chance "through massive non-violent action, an opportunity to avoid a national disaster and create a new spirit of class and racial harmony . . . All of us are on trial in this troubled hour, but time still permits us to meet the future with a clear conscience."³⁴ King went on to argue that massive non-violent direct action protest is the only solution to Northern riots and outlined the basic goals of the PPC, labeling it as a benchmark for the success or failure of non-violence. Comparing the campaign to Selma and Birmingham, King

³² Murdock Benjamin interviewed by Malaika Lumumba 3/19/70 Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #542.

³³ National Educational Television, transcript, 12/30/68, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #76.

insisted that the PPC would continue as long as needed to meet the demands of an Economic Bill of Rights, ensuring a guaranteed job or income to all Americans. While their leader was unable to join them in this effort, the Committee of 100 kicked off the PPC and proved that non-violent protest was still a viable tactic in the post-King era as a group of impoverished citizens traveled to the nation's capital to demand that the government meet their most basic needs.

THE COMMITTEE OF 100

The Committee of 100 and their caravan through the capital to various government agencies set the tone for the entire campaign. While their journeys were short and inconsequential compared to the other caravans, the Committee of 100 was perhaps the first multiracial group of poor people in U.S. history to confront their government officials face to face, demanding adequate food, shelter, and income as their basic rights. The lobbying caravan announced their arrival by issuing a “Declaration,” which invoked the Declaration of Independence and mimicked its form—presenting a list of violations, followed by a set of demands, and claims of revolt if demands were not met. Rather than targeting the President, the Committee targeted Congress, recognizing their power to transform “the will of the people into national programs to reach all people.”

The Committee of 100 framed their demands on moral grounds and warned of the consequences, both national and individual, of not responding to them. Like King before him, Abernathy declared that, “the stability of a civilization, the potential of free

³⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Showdown for Non-Violence,” *Look* (April 16, 1968): 23-26

government and the simple honor of men” were at stake. He warned middle-class Americans that they, too, were in danger of suffering individual hardship in a society of inequality and greed: “Affluent Americans are locked into suburbs of physical comfort and mental insecurity; poor Americans are locked inside ghettos of material privation and spiritual debilitation; and all of America can almost feel a kind of social insanity which could lead to national ruin.”³⁵ Despite the grim warnings, the Committee of 100 pledged their allegiance to the hope and promise of the United States. But they also critiqued the government for their unfulfilled promises, from the 1946 empty guarantee for full employment as national policy while unemployment ran rampant over twenty years later, and the hollowness of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, which had left the nation almost as segregated than before. The Committee’s declaration made plain that the war in Vietnam, and the Cold War arms race and space race were the greatest impediments to eradicating poverty, insisting that “justice requires an economic base.” Without providing poor people with access to capital, equality was impossible.

After declaring a state of emergency and establishing the PPC as the solution, the declaration presented the basic facts of poverty. Abernathy identified the poor as the 25 million men, women, and children “who cannot get enough money for a decent life.”³⁶ Rather than blaming their poverty on their behavior, the Committee explained that they were poor because of where they lived, how old they were, how poorly their bodies functioned, how insufficient their education was, and how appropriate their skin color or speech was in a racist and nationalistic society. While the reasons for their poverty

³⁵ “Declaration of Committee of 100,” April 28, 1968, SCLC, 177:25, 1-2.

differed, the Committee of 100 argued that the chief reason they were poor was because they were “without real recognition or power in the economic and decision making places of this nation.”³⁷ The PPC enabled poor people, who made up over two-thirds of the Committee of 100, the mobility to confront their government representatives face-to-face. The Committee of 100s’ trip to Washington if nothing else gave poor people the agency, representation, and access they were lacking at home.

The Bill of Economic and Social Rights

After listing the government’s violations of their rights and characterizing the moral grounds of their movement, the Committee of 100 presented their five basic demands as an Economic Bill of Rights. The first demand was “a meaningful job at a living wage for every employable citizen.” The Committee insisted that while private industry should help, that the government should be the first source of employment for the poor by initiating public works programs to meet the nations needs in health, education, and recreation that would not require education or training as pre-requisites. The second demand was “a secure and adequate income for all who cannot find jobs or for whom employment is inappropriate,” such as the elderly, the disabled, mothers with no day care options, and children. While the old and disabled were supposed to be entitled to government aid, the Committee charged that the current system was a “patchwork of utterly inadequate and discriminatory programs” that left twenty-six million people, 11.5 million of which were children, without relief.

³⁶ Abernathy’s estimate was conservative compared with both Lampman’s and Harrington’s. See discussion in chapter 1.

³⁷ Proposal-April 28, 1968, “Declaration,” KL, SCLC, 177:25.

The third demand, “access to land as a means to income and livelihood,” might seem radical and in opposition to capitalist principles, but it was rooted in the white European Americans’ historical theft of native peoples and Mexican citizens land. The Committee called for a “modernized homestead act” that would make public land and unused land available to poor people, as well as the tools needed to work it, credit and technical assistance to build on it, and adequate public services to dwell there. The multiracial coalition insisted on land as a right of all of the poor—the southern poor, black and white, many of who lost their jobs and therefore their homes plantations, into pockets of rural poverty or inner city slums; the Indian poor who had had their land, culture, and people stolen, raped, and killed; the Mexican American poor who lost their land to the economically and politically powerful; the Appalachian poor who suffered at the hands of greedy corporate heads who stripped their land and their livelihoods dry. If land was and is the cornerstone of economic growth and wealth in the United States, it makes sense that was a fundamental demand in this anti-poverty movement.

The Committee’s fourth demand was probably considered equally as radical. They demanded “access to capital as a means of full participation in the economic life of America” and called on the Federal Reserve to designate ten percent of funds available for minority group business and development with the poor in control of determining the areas of greatest need. The Committee was not asking for a handout, but rather the same help getting started that most Americans received. Their declaration revealed the hypocrisies of poverty in a rich nation and how the poor created the nation’s wealth. Abernathy declared that

. . . to live in a capitalist economy with no access to capital is to be in slavery, as surely as if one's feet were bound by chains. The poor must not be forced to compete for capital for basic needs of housing, community businesses, and economic development while funds are readily available to luxury hotel and resort development for the rich man's holidays. We, the poor, created the capital base of this society through our labor for hundreds of years as slaves, indentured servants, laborers in the mines and exploited service vocations. Now we come for our fair share of the fruits of our labors, and an opportunity to use the capital, which we helped to create. It is our money in social security deposits, pension funds, and governmental budget deposits and we must share in the living it produces.³⁸

While the Committee of 100 and SCLC leadership were skeptical about whether their demands would be met, simply articulating why they deserved this access and how other Americans had benefited from government handouts helped the group establish the potentially more achievable demands of guaranteed jobs or income.

The final demand reflected a basic organizing principle of the civil rights, welfare rights, black power, anti-war, and women's liberation movements—that the government recognize the right of the people to “play a truly significant role” in shaping government programs design and implementation. The Committee issued an explicit critique of the War on Poverty programs, which supposedly initiated the principle of “maximum feasible participation,” declaring that, “If we were equal residents in the citadels of power we would not need to leave our communities and friends to go to Washington,” and invoked King's assassination, insisting that their leader “gave his life for the right of public employees to organize” and that Congress must insure the right of all workers to bargain collectively. The reference to King's death played on feelings of white liberal guilt and cast the Committee of 100 in moral terms as crusaders sent to rectify the death of their leader, while the comparison to the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike

³⁸ Ibid.

established a frame of reference for the lobbying caravan. With many anxious congressmen fearing assaults on their offices and homes, the Committee presented itself as a union of the poor, ready to sit down at the bargaining table and lobby for the rights of poor people, whether employed or not.

The Committee of 100 included members of religious, peace, and inter-racial justice support groups. Approximately two-thirds were activists from these organizations and local poor people they had organized, while the other third were SCLC staff members. One of the most vocal Chicano leaders at the Minority Meeting, Reies Lopez Tijerina, leader of the Alianza, a New Mexico-based activist group fighting for recognition of Mexican land grants in the Southwest, was unable to attend this lobbying caravan. Historian Patricia Bell Blawis reports that on April 26, just two days after Abernathy named Tijerina as the Southwest Coordinator for the PPC, and only two hours before he was to leave for Washington, the Chicano leader was arrested along with twelve Alianza members. District Judge Samuel Montoya, the first cousin of state Senator Montoya, Alianza's adversary, issued new warrants for previously dismissed charges.³⁹ Both Tijerina and SCLC interpreted the arrests as an attempt to suppress political activism in the Southwest and Chicano involvement in the PPC. The strong display of unity among the Committee of 100's diverse coalition posed a grave threat to politicians who recognized the power of a multiracial alliance of poor people.⁴⁰

³⁹ Blawis, 115.

⁴⁰ The FBI's COINTELPRO division escalated their attacks on radicals during the mid-to-late 1960s. Chicago police shot down Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in his sleep when Hampton began forming a multiracial alliance among Chicago's radical activist organizations.

At each visit, an SCLC official read a pre-prepared statement of demands, specific to that government agency. After the demands were established, impoverished citizens testified before their government representatives on “‘how it is’ to be destitute in the lap of abundance.” Rather than demanding an immediate response, the Committee informed government officials that they would be given ten days to reply to the specific demands. While the five basic demands outlined in the Declaration established the PPC’s basic goals, the meetings with various government officials enabled the activists to articulate the specific demands that each government institution was responsible for ensuring.

Phillip Buskirk, an American Friends Service Committee member, served as the Head of the Legislative Committee for the PPC. He, along with assistance from SCLC advisers, including Marian Wright, developed the various demands for each government department after conducting extensive research. This group started with the principles of a guaranteed job or income as a basic right and then assessed how to translate economic ability—how “to live decently”—into legislative goals, while considering what was available, what others had proposed, and who they could target for support. This group studied existing programs and assessed why they were not reaching the poor and what improvements could be made. Buskirk explained that the biggest impediment to the PPC’s success would be Congress because the small group of powerful senators who controlled Congress were anti-spending, regardless of what the proposed expenditures could and would do.⁴¹ While Congress held the strings to the nation’s purse, the

⁴¹ Phillip Buskirk, Head of the Legislative Committee for the PPC, interviewed by James Mosby (6/12/68), Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #381.

Committee of 100 began their lobbying caravan around the capital by confronting the nation's top cop.

U.S. Department of Justice

The Committee of 100 began its caravan just north of the National Mall and the National Museum of Natural History on Constitution Ave at the Department of Justice. On April 29, 1968, Abernathy issued a set of demands on behalf of the Committee of 100 to Attorney General Ramsey Clark and Roger Wilkins, director of the Justice Department's Community Relations Service. Abernathy began by declaring that despite previously passed civil rights legislation, such as the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, justice was "not a reality" for the minority poor because discrimination in employment, housing, education, and law enforcement persisted. Abernathy blamed the recent riots and the general growing disrespect for the law on the Department of Justice's "lack of affirmative, rigorous enforcement of existing laws." The Committee insisted that greater coordination between the Justice Department, Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance could result in swift and systematic litigation against discriminatory employers and non-complying school districts—North and South, urban and rural—that violated anti-discrimination laws and desegregation rulings, and demanded immediate and rigorous enforcement of the newly passed 1968 Civil Rights Act that promised fair housing.

The fourth demand revealed the limits of coalitions of the poor and the persistent problem of competing economic demands and nationalistic sentiments as it called for

protection for farm workers against “green-card” strikebreakers, as well as an investigation into all strike-bound growers in the Delano-San Joaquin Valley and prosecution of those who employed “illegals.” The multiracial coalition made a specific plea to the Department of Justice to investigate and prosecute cases of “illegal jailings, brutal beatings, of Mexican-Americans,” particularly farm workers in Texas and California, and to protect reservation Indians from police brutality and infringements of their hunting and fishing rights in Mississippi, Oklahoma, Washington, and Oregon.⁴²

After Abernathy read the prepared statement, the Committee of 100 participants spoke about their own grievances. Mrs. Allen, a “petite, dark-skinned woman” insisted that the 1968 Fair Housing Act be enforced because, as she argued, only by living with one another could people understand one another. Mr. Fulcher, who represented poor whites, embraced Mrs. Allen’s call for unity, declaring his commitment to work with poor blacks, Indians, and Spanish-speaking Americans. While the majority of exchanges were formal and amicable, when Ramsey Clark began to deliver a response, NWRO activist Linda Cusumano interrupted him and escalated the tenor of the exchange, demanding to know what the Department was going to do about “youth houses being abolished” and “Indians being beaten up.” Lares Tresjam, a migrant worker from Chautaugua County, New York, described his living conditions as “legitimate murder.” Other NWRO activists, Etta Horn and Dovie Coleman, joined in demanding repeal of the recent Social Security amendments, which had negatively affected over eight million welfare recipients. A white NWRO activist from Chicago, Peggy Terry, chastised her

⁴² Interestingly, no mention was made of police brutality against blacks, political imprisonment and of black activists, or the lack of prosecution of whites who killed black activists. See

fellow southern whites, declaring, she was “tired of being used” and “tired of having to bow our heads in shame to our black sisters and brothers because of what some white people do.” Despite what must have seemed like a tense situation to the government officials present, black activist, Ray Robinson, Jr. berated the crowd for its “middle-class hang-ups” and “fat-mouthing,” and insisted that they “ought to bring this thing down to earth right now. There’s no coming back.” Responding to this call for militancy, the always eloquent Andrew Young calmed the crowd, declaring that they “we’re a family.”⁴³ But the poor people spoke truth to power, regardless of whether or not their counterparts felt their demeanor was appropriate.

After this uncharacteristic lobbying session, the Attorney General provided his immediate response, which was that the Department had heard the same complaints before and that progress was being made. Clark weakly acknowledged that “man is not the most efficient or effective creature we would hope him to be” and pointed to the very recent increase in anti-discrimination suits during the previous six months. Clark patronizingly warned, “We’ll do our best and I hope you will do yours.” Abernathy warned that while they did not expect an immediate response to the demands, 3,000 poor people would join him in the nation’s capital in just over ten days for a more adequate response.⁴⁴

The Attorney General finally responded to the Committee’s demands in detail on May 22. Rather than initiating any new programs or filing any new suits, the Attorney General simply listed the Department’s activities in the areas of complaint. Clark

Committee of 100 Demands, KL, SCLC, 177: 24, 8.

⁴³ Greg Harris, Report on PPC meeting at U.S. Department of Justice, KL, SCLC, 177: 29.

attached a list of the seventeen suits filed since July 1, 1967, noted the 150 employment matters under investigation, and mentioned the 165-school desegregation cases in fourteen southern states, including a statewide suit in Alabama. Clark cited the prosecution for the deaths of five civil rights activists, despite the fact that countless activists and non-activists of color had died at the hands of both civilians and law enforcement agents across the nation. In response to the Mexican Americans' specific demands, the Justice Department reported that they had been meeting with leaders of the Mexican American community and that fifteen investigations of civil rights violations were underway throughout the Southwest. Clark insisted that investigations of strikebreaking "green card holders" were being conducted and assured the American Indians that three Supreme Court cases were being heard in which the Department was promoting protection of their special hunting and fishing rights. While Clark referenced some activity, all of the actions were within the past year and were limited in scope compared to the extent of the problems being addressed.

Department of Labor

Later that day, Abernathy led a group of over fifty representatives down Constitution Avenue past the National Gallery of Art to the Labor Department, just across from the Reflecting Pool. The Committee they met with Secretary of Labor William Wirtz and his under secretaries to present the PPC's employment-related demands. Despite calls from the Riot Commission, the Automation Commission, and other labor groups, the government had done nothing to produce more jobs to cope with

⁴⁴ Greg Harris, Report on PPC meeting at U.S. Department of Justice, KL, SCLC, 177: 29.
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the transformation into a post-industrial service economy. The Committee insisted that the “government must lead the way as the employer of first resort.” After outlining the failures of the War on Poverty JOBS programs and Manpower Development and Training (MDTA) Programs, Abernathy presented the Committee’s demands—1) support the Clark bill and Conyers bill; 2) encourage private businesses to hire the poor and unemployed in exchange for realistic incentives; 3) involve the poor in decision making about both employment and manpower training programs; 4) enforce fair employment regulations and cancel government contracts with companies that discriminate or lack minority representation; and 5) reform MDTA programs so that they provide on-the-job training with an absolute guarantee of a job that pays a living wage. The Committee critiqued the Labor Department for underrating the number of unemployed and reported that half of the unemployed interviewed in one city in Texas had never been inside the local Employment office.⁴⁵

Several representatives of the various minority groups spoke to more specific concerns. Corky Gonzalez of the Chicano Denver-base Crusade for Justice represented Mexican-Americans’ labor concerns, while Cleveland Robinson, President of the American Negro Labor Council, represented black workers. Guermo Valentin, a Puerto Rican from New York, called for quicker and more efficient training and hiring in the guildsmen and journeymen programs, while Cliff Johnson of Eastern Kentucky, condemned the MDTA training programs as inadequate and obsolete. Two black women from Mississippi and a youth from Baltimore complained of inadequate living conditions due to intermittent and unstable work, while Martha Grass, a Ponca Indian from

⁴⁵ Committee of 100 Demands, KL, SCLC, 177204.

Okalahoma, and George Wiley, president and founder of the NWRO, demanded a guaranteed annual income for all poor. All of the poor had different demands that reflected their regional and individual economic situations, but they all shared two basic needs: a steady job or income and training that is in line with available and accessible jobs.

Like the Attorney General, Secretary Wirtz and all of his undersecretaries gave immediate assurance that they were supportive of the Committee's demands and would respond "in the near future with actions-not words."⁴⁶ Reflecting back, Wirtz assessed the worthiness of the PPC when interviewed in December of 1969 and declared that "a little bit came out of it" and that in his department "there was tangible reflection of the points that were made, and there was no further scene of that." He recounts that the Labor Department was one of the few lucky government institutions that escaped the impromptu visits from representatives of the PPC during their stay at Resurrection City because, according to Wirtz, the PPC leadership was satisfied with his department's performance.⁴⁷

Department of Agriculture

The Department of Agriculture was the Committee's next stop. The activists marched down NW 3rd Street, alongside the Reflecting Pool and turned west on

⁴⁶ Report from Doug Otto on Committee of 100 meeting with Labor Department, KL, SCLC, 177:24.

⁴⁷ Wirtz's overall estimation of the PPC was that it contributed to "a sort of alienation of attitude as far as the country as a whole was concerned. People didn't like it." Wirtz predicted that it would take the passing of a generation before real progress for the poor would find support and laid blame with the media, particularly its depictions of crime, poverty, and race, and questioned "whether democracy and television can co-exist." Interview with Willard Wirtz conducted by James Mosby 12/11/1968 Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project.

Independence Avenue, where they marched past the National Air and Space Museum and other Smithsonian buildings beyond 12th Street to the Agriculture building. The PPC targeted this site more than others because the Department was responsible for ensuring that the nation's citizens had enough food to eat. Approximately 146 poor people and SCLC staff joined Abernathy, Corky Gonzales, NWRO activist Etta Horn, Puerto Rican representative Guerno Valentin, Appalachian representative Robert Fulcher, migrant labor representative Lares Resjan, and representative of the Spanish-speaking people of the Southwest, Father Varragan of San Antonio, in a meeting with Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman on April 29.⁴⁸ The meeting began with a reminder to the Department that after the hearings in Jackson, Mississippi, the previous April and the Field Foundation-sponsored report from doctors on the extent of malnutrition and starvation, the Department of Agriculture's own staff freely admitted they had found "evidence of malnutrition and unmet hunger." Yet a year had passed, and the Department of Agriculture had taken no real action, other than more investigations. The Citizens Board of Inquiry on Hunger and Malnutrition reported that as of April 1, 1968, "concrete evidence of chronic hunger and malnutrition" existed throughout the nation, with approximately 300 of the 800 counties identified as the poorest in the nation lacking any food programs. Meanwhile the Department had returned \$220 million back to the Treasury Department that legally could have been used to feed starving people in these counties. Building on earlier complaints about the administration of the food stamps program, the Committee criticized the Department's use of \$2.7 million for administrative costs in counties using the food stamps program rather than using these

⁴⁸ Meeting with Department of Agriculture, KLC 177: 26.

funds for food distribution in counties not covered. The Committee demanded immediate use of excess funds to institute food programs in the counties with none and provisions for free food stamps or a commodity distribution program for those who cannot afford the stamps. The multiracial coalition of poor people insisted that improvements be made in the quality and amount of commodities by both educating consumers and employing poor people in the programs and demanded that the Department institute free lunches and other improvements in school lunch programs suggested in the National School Lunch Study, *Their Daily Bread*, and implement the recommendations of the Citizens Board of Inquiry for alleviating hunger.⁴⁹

Along with these broad demands, the Committee insisted on special provisions to address the needs of poor farmers so they would not have to abandon the farm for the city. The group reminded the Department that few if any improvements had been made since the 1965 Civil Rights Commission Report, "Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs," exposed rampant discrimination in federal agriculture programs, such as the Farmers Home Administration, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service and the Federal Extension Service, as well as within the Department itself. In response to this lack of progress, the Committee insisted that the Department report on any progress made, establish a timetable for rectifying existing discriminatory practices, and disclose how the Department intended to use \$2.5 million of OEO's Rural Special Impact funds.

⁴⁹ Ralph Abernathy, Statement to the Department of Agriculture, April 29, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:1. The information garnered from participants in the PPC's registration forms and questionnaires and the testimony of poor people from across the country revealed that while the government was able to reach the working poor, federal programs failed to reach the nation's severely impoverished citizens. See chapters two and four more a more detailed discussion of this testimony.

The other major demands were direct rebukes to the dominance of agribusiness. The Committee called on the Department to ensure farm workers the right to collectively bargain with the government and farm employees; to assist farm workers in organizing and administering cooperative labor pools that would replace the farm placement service; to cancel all subsidies, contracts, and services with farm employers that employ “illegals” or “green card holders” during strikes; and to abolish the annual acreage diversion policy which subsidized larger farmers not to grow while the poor went hungry.⁵⁰ After presenting these specific demands, members of the audience were given an opportunity to provide personal testimony on the needs of the poor. Lela Mae Brooks, a black woman from the Mississippi Delta, Martha Grass, a Ponca Indian from Oklahoma, and a black woman from Baltimore all reported on the problems with the food stamp program. Of the 146 in attendance, many participants spoke of the need for more money, more jobs, and better housing and food.⁵¹

Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman basically ignored the Committee’s demands and, like the other government officials before him, bragged about all that his department had already done, citing the hundred thousand “poverty loans” made to individuals and small cooperatives and the double in loans from 1964’s 10,985 to 1968’s 21,636 loans as evidence of real progress. While he agreed with the Committee that most of the problems poor people faced resulted from the growth of agribusiness and its reliance on mechanized agricultural processes and new pesticides, the Secretary failed to

⁵⁰ Ralph Abernathy, Statement to the Department of Agriculture, April 29, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:1.

⁵¹ KL, SCLC, 177:26.

take responsibility for the role government subsidies played in producing the dominance of agribusiness.

Freeman also had several misconceptions about what it meant to be poor and hungry. When interviewed in January of 1969, Freeman patronizingly recounted how “a very jolly Negro farmer who had a little land, not enough, but was a barber” was able to build a little shop and cut the Secretary’s hair. Freeman neglected to consider that perhaps this man would have preferred to work either as a farmer *or* a barber rather than having to work two jobs just to get by. The Secretary also had misguided notions about what it meant to go hungry in a rich nation. Freeman complained that he gave the PPC everything he could and was made the fall guy because, as he explained, “food is an emotional thing.” Freeman explained that free food stamps were not legal or practical solution because the poor would use the money for something other than food and would not get as much food as the food stamps provided.⁵² But the Secretary failed to recognize, despite countless testimonies from poor people and government representatives, that there were people living in the United States that had no money—none, no money for food or food stamps, and no money for anything else. So giving free food stamps would not enable people to spend money on other less honorable purchases, they would enable impoverished and malnourished people to survive. Rather than providing a rational response to the Committee’s demands, Freeman felt personally attacked and declared that the PPC was not really about presenting demands but was instead a “publicity stunt.” Ignoring the long list of demands presented, the Secretary

⁵² Orville Freeman Interviewed by Robert Wright, 1/14/1969, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #369.

proclaimed, “they didn’t want anything done, they wanted attention,” complaining that they made the Department of Agriculture “a daily junket.” What Freeman failed to realize is that the PPC targeted the Department of Agriculture because the problems mechanization of agriculture and government subsidies to powerful agribusiness caused could be ameliorated through the action of the Department if they chose to act.⁵³ The PPC was intended to be a publicity stunt because activists felt a moral obligation to expose the fact that children were starving in a wealthy nation, while farmers were being paid not to grow food. The purpose of the PPC was to shake the American people’s conscience awake to the hypocrisy of U.S. policies.

Office of Economic Opportunity

Like the Department of Labor officials, the Office of Economic Opportunity staff thought they were serving the interests of the poor, but the Committee of 100 demonstrated otherwise. While Abernathy led his contingent, Rev. Andrew Young, the Executive Vice President of SCLC led another group of Committee of 100 representatives and delivered their demands to OEO’s Acting Director Bertram Harding on April 29, 1968. Young declared that while PPC representatives were in Washington to expose poverty to other governmental institutions that ignored them, that the OEO had failed the poor as a department designed specifically to address the needs of the poor. Above all, the Committee called for greater involvement of the poor in every stage of policy development and administration. In order to allow poor people to have real power in determining the direction of these programs, the Committee insisted that the OEO

⁵³ Orville Freeman Interview.

implement clear and simple appeal procedures and criteria for evaluating programs. While these steps would assist poor people when participating in policy making decisions affecting them, the Committee also insisted on the establishment of requirements to ensure that local politicians fairly direct CAP programs and funds to *all* poor people, regardless of their race or marital status.⁵⁴

Department of Health Education and Welfare

The following day, April 30, Andrew Young led a multiracial group of activists to Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), located southeast of the National Mall near the Reflecting Pool, between Independence Avenue SW and C Street SW. There, they met with Secretary of HEW Wilbur Cohen and presented their demands to Cohen and Mary Switzer, Administrator of Social Service and Rehabilitation for HEW. Bernard Lafayette read a statement detailing the urgent need for available health care, particularly for the rural poor, and decrying the contradictions of white privilege and the persistence of poverty amid prosperity:

We come to ask why the American know-how that can move a wounded Marine from the jungles of Vietnam to the finest medical care in minutes cannot and does not do the same for a sick child in the Mississippi delta or on an Indian reservation. We come to ask why a rich nation with the most advanced medical knowledge in the world can develop artificial organs yet cannot provide inoculations against disease to many of its poorest children. We come to tell you that there are children in this country who have never been examined by a doctor or a dentist who might have grown up without serious handicap or chronic ailment had care been available to them. We come to tell you that health services do not accord the poor the same kind of dignified and humane treatment that those who can pay expect and get and that poor patients often suffer the humiliation of serving as guinea pigs—teaching material to educate doctors and dentists who will graduate into the service of the rich. We come to tell you that the poor live in open contact with serious health hazards—rats and vermin;

⁵⁴ Committee of 100 Demands, KL, SCLC 177:24.

accumulation of waste and garbage; sewage lines and water lines so dangerously close that their contents sometime mingle.⁵⁵

Like other SCLC ministers, Lafayette placed the Committee's demands on moral grounds and as a long-time peace activist argued that the failures of combating poverty at home were due to the costs of fighting wars abroad.

While the examples Lafayette provided were dramatic and appalling, other demands reflected goals that have still not been realized. The Committee's demands included: 1) giving priority to providing health care programs for the poor, particularly those in rural areas; 2) expanding Medicare to cover all the medically indigent; 3) assuring that the poor had access to existing health services; 4) vigorously enforcing civil rights legislation regarding access to health care services; 5) bringing health services to the poor where they lived; 6) involving poor people in planning committees for health care and Medicaid programs; 7) making the \$25 million provided for in the Emergency Food program available to the undernourished; 8) creating a sanitation program to help poor communities rid themselves of vermin and establish adequate sewage and clean water supply and employ local poor to do this work; 9) organizing centers for mother and child health care needs; and 10) training poor people for jobs to improve health care. After detailing the needs in the realm of health care, the Committee addressed problems with the education and welfare systems.

Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy, Washington Director for SCLC, read a statement addressing education issues. He demanded that HEW "give primary and massive attention" to the needs of the poor and "to the criminally deficient schools" their children

⁵⁵ Committee of 100 Demands, KL, SCLC 177:24.

attend, and put an end to “the preferential treatment given to high salaried administrators, to antiquated racist state departments of education, and to politicians who generally respond only to white, middle-class constituencies and the pampered schools of suburbia.”⁵⁶ The Committee emphasized the importance of self-determination and racial pride, demanding that funding for educational programs should be given only to programs that “permit poor black, brown, and white children to express their own worth and dignity as human beings, as well as the extent to which instruction, teaching materials, and the total learning process stresses the contributions and the common humanity of minority groups.” The Committee’s demands reflected those of civil rights workers who taught in Freedom Schools and Black Panthers who called for community self-determination in all social institutions and established this practice through their “survival programs.”

Specific demands included the abolishment of the freedom of choice desegregation plans in the South, eradication of the dual black and white school systems by the fall of 1968, and establishment of a national structure that would enable the poor to provide continuous input on the design, development, operation, and evaluation of federally-funded education programs. The Committee also insisted that local schools publicize their per pupil expenditures, drop-out rates, and reading levels by school and grade, and develop federally-funded teacher certification and re-certification training and testing services. The first and easiest action for HEW to take was to institute affirmative action hiring practices in the Department’s own educational policy making positions.

⁵⁶ Committee of 100 Demands, KL, SCLC 177:24.

After addressing health and education issues, Jesse Jackson read a statement that lambasted the current welfare system for making it harder for poor families to stay together and chastised social workers for harassing and humiliating recipients. He deemed the welfare system both “immoral and disgraceful” and issued the Committee’s specific welfare-related demands, which included repeal of the 1967 welfare amendments, which imposed compulsory work provisions, limited assistance, and denied assistance to families with unemployed fathers. The Committee also insisted that while awaiting action, HEW should ensure that mothers who had no available childcare services would be exempt from the work requirement and “simplify and humanize” the welfare program by requiring only a declaration of facts to determine eligibility rather than intrusions into the details of poor people’s lives.

Finally, like all of the other contingents, the Committee demanded that the poor play a role in determining the structure and practice of welfare, both by working in the welfare agencies and by establishing community evaluation systems for existing programs. Other specific reforms responded to social workers intrusions into poor people’s lives, restrictions on their family structure, and limitations on their personal relationships. They demanded the elimination of the patriarchal “man in the house” rule, payment for appeal lawyers and continuation of welfare payments until rulings were decided, as well as more aggressive enforcement of civil rights requirements, particularly “courteous treatment of applicants and recipients and the uniform use of courtesy titles in addressing them.” The Committee also encouraged development of experimental income maintenance programs in both urban and rural areas to figure out what solutions work best in different places.

Assistant Secretary of HEW Ralph K. Huitt's only response was that his department supported the goals of the PPC and would do all they could to enact the Committee's demands. While Huitt claimed he thought it was important that the PPC be a "public success," his department did not report back on any measures it would take to help insure that the PPC produced long-lasting successes.⁵⁷

Department of Housing and Urban Development

Meanwhile, Bernard Lafayette led another coalition of the Committee of 100 on April 30 to the nearby offices of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), located between 7th and 9th Street south of the Mall and D Street, where the group presented their demands to Secretary of HUD, Robert C. Weaver. Lafayette challenged the culture of poverty theory, which proposed that the poor had a psychology that was somehow different and apart from other Americans. Instead, he argued that poor people's housing goals were no different than those of other Americans: "They want a decent house at a reasonable price. They want a choice of housing type and a choice in its location. They want to live in a neighborhood where their families can live in dignity, with good schools and other good services." Lafayette complained that while HUD had listened to "the builder, the banker, and the bureaucrat," it was time that the government listened to the poor about what they needed. While the government promised decent housing for all Americans in 1949, Lafayette insisted that this promise only rang true for middle-class whites.

⁵⁷ Ralph K. Huitt, Former Assistant Secretary of HEW interviewed by Helen Hull, 9/17/1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Project, Tape #456.

The Committee's specific demands included that HUD vigorously facilitate the construction of decent low income housing, enforce the nondiscriminatory clauses of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and involve poor people in the planning of new developments with representation from the geographic, racial, and economic communities affected. Posing another challenge to stereotypes of the poor as lazy and apathetic, the Committee demanded that poor people be put to work at the established minimum wage for construction and rehabilitation of low-income housing and for the Model Cities programs and that federal excess lands be used for new housing for the poor. Two demands spoke directly to Mexican American's housing problems, one calling for HUD to recruit Chicanos to contribute to policy-making decisions both in the Southwest and in Washington, and the other demanding HUD create a special Housing program for Spanish-speaking people that was "more realistically in line with their cultural habits and ability to pay." In addition, the Committee demanded that HUD publicize information for Mexican Americans about low income housing programs and employ them in FHA programs as mortgage brokers and appraisers. The group also insisted that the Department establish long-term plans to help the poor, including the creation of a five-year, detailed plan to meet the poor's housing needs; encouragement of corporation development that is poor-owned and operated; and a guarantee that sewer, water, planning, and open space grants would only be given to communities with a "fair share" of a city's supply of low and moderate income housing. In response to what many blacks termed "Urban Negro Removal," the Committee called for urban renewal programs to increase relocation grants for families the government programs displaced.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Committee of 100 Demands, KL, SCLC, 177216.

Secretary Weaver, like others, explained that he was doing all he could, but that he was only one man and could not make appropriations in Congress then touted the legislation he did get passed. Instead of responding to the group's demands, Weaver complained about the erratic nature of the Committee of 100's visit—how they set up an appointment, broke it, set up another appointment and showed up about six hours later—and recounted that they had “a little confrontation” because the PPC wanted the media present. The Secretary allowed the press but kept the “electronic media” out because as Weaver insisted, “I felt that they were supposed to be there to negotiate with me, rather than making a presentation of themselves to the country. If they want to do that, its fine, but I felt they could do that on their own time.” Weaver not only criticized the nature of the Committee's visit, but also their demands, claiming that some of the charges “were absolutely without basis.” The Committee's call for Weaver's resignation due to a lack of progress under his two-year term offended him. Like others he defended himself as being in support for all of the specifics the Committee demanded, declaring that “we weren't too far apart,” freeing himself from responsibility by insisting that some of the poor people's demands “were impossible for me to do. Either I haven't the legal authority to do it or else it would have been impossible for me to get it done.”⁵⁹ While all of the cabinet and government officials could claim the decisions were out of their hands, the nation's lawmakers had no such defense.

⁵⁹ Secretary of HUD Robert C. Weaver interviewed by James Mosby on 2/12/1969 Ralph Bunche Oral History Project, Tape #377.

Senate Committee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty

After visiting other relevant government agencies on April 30, the Committee of 100 headed to the Capitol where they called on the Senate Committee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty on. Abernathy began by challenging senators' claims that the PPC was too radical and that they were asking for too much:

We don't think it's too much to ask for a decent place to live in at reasonable prices in a country with a Gross National Product of 800 billion dollars. We don't think it's too radical to want to help choose the type of housing and the location. We don't think it's asking for pie in the sky to want to live in neighborhoods where our families can live and grow up with dignity, surrounded by the kind of facilities and services that other Americans take for granted.⁶⁰

Repeating the mantra of self-determination pronounced at all the previous sessions, Abernathy insisted that the people in these communities should determine the design and implementation of any plans. Like his fellow minister leaders in SCLC, Abernathy tested the conscience of the Congress, asking whether they were willing to let rats bite little children or families to live in sewage. He challenged the culture of poverty theory, insisting that while there were some "who like to salve their consciences and confirm their prejudices by saying that most of the poor really don't want to work, that poor people really prefer the shabby and insulting handouts which represent Welfare." The Committee of 100 and their lobbying caravan demonstrated poor people's will to change their situation. The participants argued that they wished to find work and participate in training programs, but that employment in government programs typically was unavailable, either due to under-funding or discriminatory practices. When available, the jobs the poor were forced to choose from force many to, as Abernathy put it, "exchange

⁶⁰ Report on Meeting with Senate Committee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty, KL, SCLC, 177:34.

our manhood for dead-end jobs which pay a boy's wages." The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike used the slogan "I Am a Man" to protest these types of jobs and wages and to challenge the plantation mentality of Memphis' Mayor Loeb.⁶¹ While government officials repeatedly declared that there was no money available for new or expanded social programs, Abernathy questioned the senator's priorities and their morals, demanding to know how Congress could fund:

. . . a multi-billion dollar space program, a massive defense budget, millions for supersonic pleasure planes, tax advantages to the richest and most powerful corporations in the world" and still "not provide a job that pays a living wage, a decent house, the food to make a child healthy and strong?"⁶²

The Committee challenged the moral logic of sending men to space while people were starving both in the U.S. and across the globe.

Unlike many of the government department officials, the Congressional Committee had the power to pass legislation for thousands of new housing units in the coming years, provide funding for the rent supplement program, and initiate programs that enable poor people to become home owners rather than "slum renters." Many of the Committee's demands echoed those made at HEW and the Labor Department, such as ending discrimination in hiring and training programs, establishing immediate income maintenance, repealing the forced work program for mothers, endorsing the Clark bill, giving farm workers collective bargaining rights, demanding results from the Department of Agriculture concerning hunger, and enacting the Citizens Board of Inquiry's policies regarding hunger and malnutrition. The Board's recommendations included declaring a

⁶¹ See Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

national state of emergency, instituting an emergency food program in the 256 hunger counties access to food programs on the basis of need rather than residence; proposing a free Food Stamp Program keyed to income, dependents, and medical expenses; recognizing the special dietary needs of children, pregnant women, the aged, and the sick; and ensuring that school lunch programs that are available to every child. The senators provided no immediate response, but they did form an ad hoc committee on poverty that promised to meet with Abernathy and other PPC representative on May 15 and throughout their PPC's stay in Washington to provide a forum for discussing the PPC's demands.⁶³

Department of State

While the State Department might seem like a strange choice for a group of impoverished U.S. citizens to present complaints and demands, the Committee of 100 delivered a prepared statement to Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, with specific demands that represented the issues that were most significant to the Chicano and American Indian contingents. The Committee demanded that the Department enforce the provisions of the Treaty of Guadalupe de Hidalgo, in its guarantee of the cultural and land rights of the "Spanish-speaking peoples of New Mexico, Colorado, etc.," a struggle Reies Tijerina had been promoting for years in his battle for recognition of Mexican land grants in New Mexico. Other demands reflect debates about immigration and alliances with unjust nation states that persist today. For instance, two of the demands included ceasing all

⁶² Report on Meeting with Senate Committee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty, KL, SCLC, 177:34.

⁶³ Report on Meeting with Senate Committee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty, KL, SCLC, 177:34.

immigration of foreign workers “until every poor American who wishes it, has attained a decent acceptable living standard and is gainfully employed,’ and to cease the use of “green card” holders as strike breakers. In sharp contrast to the nationalistic sentiment of the immigration restrictions, the Committee demanded that the United States cut off all its relations with South Africa and Portugal due to their racist practices. The statement concluded by demanding that the Agency for International Development, which contracts with private food companies to develop fortified foods to meet needs in underdeveloped countries, share its resources and information so the U.S. poor could receive more food options.⁶⁴

Department of Interior

On May 1, the Committee of 100 headed west down Independence Avenue, passing the Washington Monument as they traveled to the Department of the Interior, located at 18th and C Street where they met with Secretary of the Interior, Stewart L. Udall, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Robert L. Bennett, and presented the officials with their various demands. This encounter was the only exchange recorded as a press briefing with a complete account of the proceedings. Abernathy introduced the group and declared that the Committee would not “dress it up in some fancy language—we may not even get our nouns to correspond with our verbs—what we are going to do with your permission is just tell it like it is.” Abernathy introduced Melvin D. Tom of the National Indian Youth council in Berkeley, California, who reiterated most of the PPC’s basic demands, such as guaranteed jobs or income, decent housing and schools, followed by

⁶⁴ KL, SCLC, 177:24.

several other American Indians who criticized the BIA and the Department of Interior for discriminatory treatment, both past and present. Tom declared that both government agencies had failed American Indians and operated “under a racist and immoral and paternalistic and colonialistic system . . . The Indian system is sick, paternalism is the virus, and the Secretary of the Interior is the carrier.”⁶⁵ While acknowledging the efforts of the BIA to involve tribes in policy making, Tom insisted that the advisory committees, such as the National Indian Education Advisory Committee, Secret Task Force, and the President’s various committees and commissions were simply examples of tokenism not expanded power.

The multiracial coalition also protested federal and local attempts to Americanize Indian children, robbing them of their communities and cultures, and demanded that tribes be able to select their own superintendents, while questioning their role need and arguing for full control of tribal resources. Tom also insisted that Indians should have the right to tax railroads that cross their lands and tax non-Indians living on their reservations. Hazel Herald, a member of the Pima Indian Tribe in Tucson, Arizona chastised the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for ignoring the needs of tribes and denigrating Indian cultures, while Hank Adams, an American Indian representative, criticized the Department of Interior for doubling the BIA’s budget while the average income of Indian families had only raised \$300 in the past fourteen years. The Indian leader provided statistics on every area of Indian life where the BIA had funding to make improvements; he railed that he had not seen any real progress, only pilot programs, busy

⁶⁵ Media Transcript on Committee of 100 Meeting with Department of the Interior, KL, SCLC, 177:37.

attorneys, and suicidal youths.⁶⁶ Many tribes declined to participate in the PPC due to “intense anti-Negro feeling” that Adams insisted BIA representatives promoted in Indian communities and behind closed doors at policy decision meetings. Tillie Walker from the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota concurred with Adams’ critique, lambasting the Secretary of the Interior and the BIA for perpetuating anti-black sentiment among American Indians and “owning” tribal leaders.

In addition to presenting the American Indians’ specific demands, the Committee called for expansion of the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Outdoor Recreation programs for all poor communities. Throughout the proceedings, numerous representatives demonstrated their support for the demands of the American Indian and Mexican American poor. A militant black native of D.C. declared his unity with all poor people and exclaimed,

I don’t think a middle-class person can make me free. If anything, we are ready now to make you free. Because our people are on the bottom, we are on solid ground . . . we have roots. I know my identity, now, and, brother, I mean to go all the way with it.⁶⁷

The activists had different local issues but remained united in their fight against white paternalism and greed. The tension in the room escalated as the D.C. native became more militant in his tone and warned the audience, “You people always have treated us as though we were nothing, invisible people, but it is all right now, brother, because we know where you are at . . . this is not no joke. We have died too long. We have suffered

⁶⁶ Adams reported on 14 youths who shot themselves with high-powered rifles and another 16 who had attempted suicide by various other means. See Committee of 100 Meeting with Department of the Interior, KL, SCLC, 177:37.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

too long.” Chicano leader Corky Gonzalez followed by declaring his support, as representative of a mestizo people, for the American Indians’ cause.

Gonzales argued that Chicanos were suffering not on reservations but in ghettos across the Southwest and that more emphasis should be put on rural renewal rather than simply on urban renewal. He advised that by simply instituting a plan for giving land back to the people through rural renewal the government could avoid the legal hassles of land grant claims, an issue which none of the officials present seemed to understand. New Mexican activist Rafeal Duran outlined the U.S. government’s violations of the Treaty of Guadalupe de Hidalgo, but Secretary Udall responded that he had no knowledge of these grants but that they should be handled as Indian land grant claims had been handled through an established Claims Commission.

Like others, Secretary Udall explained that his department should do more and was doing more. Despite pledging his support to the PPC in the meeting with the Committee of 100, the press reported that Udall viewed the PPC’s potential use of public parks as “improper,” explaining that public parks should be available for all people to use “not for any kind of human shelter—permanent or temporary.”⁶⁸ Yet he insisted that he was fully supportive of Indian participation in the PPC and that he would make sure none of his staff acted otherwise. He insisted that what he wanted for the American Indian was for “him to find his own place, to appreciate his own culture, to have his own

⁶⁸ “Still On: Dr. King’s March,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 29, 1968, 10.

identity,” in addition to experiencing the same opportunities afforded to other Americans.⁶⁹

RECEPTION TO THE LOBBYING CARAVAN

The Committee of 100 made the invisible poor seen and the silenced minorities heard. This first caravan took leaders and poor people out of their local situations, gave them access to their government representatives, and thrust their issues into the national spotlight. Bill Wingell detailed the experiences of several participants for the national media, reporting on two black male senior citizens from South Carolina who joined in the meeting at the OEO but voiced their skepticism about whether the government would actually respond to their demands since the officials never actually said they would help. Wingell also reported on an encounter with Attorney General Ramsey Clark at which another representative made a dramatic outburst, demanding that there were “two standards in the administration of justice. And unless you change it, we’re going to change it—the working people, black, brown, white, red, yellow. And unless you change it, we’re going to change you.” The media gave Committee of 100 representatives like Lela Mae Brooks from Sunflower County, Mississippi, the home of both Senator James Eastland and SNCC activist Fanny Lou Hamer, the opportunity to publicly challenge those in power. Brooks corrected Eastland who claimed people in Mississippi were satisfied, demanding that she and others had traveled to Washington “to let the world

⁶⁹ Media Transcript on Committee of 100 Meeting with Department of the Interior, KL, SCLC, 177:37.

know we is hungry people.”⁷⁰ Wingell’s article gave the Committee of 100 representatives to opportunity to share their needs and complaints with the nation.

Meanwhile, other media outlets condemned the radical nature of the PPC. The *U.S. News & World Report* reported that the Committee of 100’s “demands were high, their words blunt, their attitudes often angry,” but commented on the softer tone of the Committee when approaching Congress, which had more direct power to determine their fate. The magazine reported that the estimated cost of the PPC’s demands was more than 25 billion a year and that congressmen were not friendly to the idea of the march. Representative George Mahon of Texas, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee declared that the march would not have much effect on their decisions, claiming that senators “cannot legislate under threats of violence.” Senator Milton R. Young of North Dakota called the PPC’s demands “unreasonable and unrealistic,” yet these same law makers passed budgets that included incredible expenses for a race to space and a costly and misguided war. Congressmen from both sides of the aisle dismissed the PPC and its demands and complained about the tardiness of the Committee of 100, while others raised more damaging charges. Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia told the Senate that the PPC had communist influences, notably David Dellinger, a self-proclaimed non-Soviet Communist, who was among the Committee of 100.⁷¹

While the Committee of 100 was lobbying Washington to respond to their demands and congressmen were critiquing the burgeoning movement, the senior editor of *Look*, T. George Harris, debated the pros and cons of a guaranteed income in “The Cry

⁷⁰ Bill Wingell, “If This Campaign Succeeds, All Our Dreams Will Succeed,” *KL*, SCLC 179:15.

for the Negative Income Tax Sets Up the Meanest Debate Since Prohibition: Do We Owe People A Living?" As Harris reported, the Guaranteed Income movement was a diverse coalition of radicals, liberals, "Negro mothers," and conservatives. Supporters ranged from anti-capitalist economist Robert Theobald to conservative economist and Goldwater presidential campaign advisor, Milton Friedman, both of whom had promoted the negative income tax since the early 1960s. Even some of Richard Nixon's campaign advisers were jumping on board the Guaranteed Income bandwagon. Harris described the negative income tax as a revolving door for the hard-earned taxes of working Americans and supported Piven and Cloward's plan for disrupting the welfare system as a way of demanding the guaranteed income, which was the PPC's central demand.

CONCLUSION

Both the Minority Meeting and the Committee of 100 were essential components of the movement, yet this stage of the PPC has received no prior scholarly attention. The Minority Meeting brought culturally, ethnically, and geographically diverse groups together, many for the first time, and enabled them to forge an alliance based on the shared experience of economic and racial oppression. This meeting laid the groundwork for both regional and national political alliances that blossomed in the coming years as the Chicano and American Indian Movements emerged in full force. The lobbying caravan through the capital acquainted PPC participants with the ways of Washington and taught them how to negotiate with politicians. These skills came in handy not only during the next stages of the PPC, but also for future protests with different campaigns.

⁷¹ "The Poor People's March: Its Demands, The Prospects," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 13, 1968, 44-45.

The first stage of the PPC presented the demands of the minority poor in detail and proposed specific legislation and programs that would help eradicate poverty. The Committee of 100 gave the government a chance to respond to their demands before enacting the second stage of the PPC, the caravans to the capital and the building of the shantytown in the capital. The following chapters explore the nine regional caravans to the capital and assess how regional and racial diversity affected the participants as they mingled with new and different people along the road to Washington.

CHAPTER FOUR

Caravanning to the Capital: Connecting the Local, Regional and National

“No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood . . . We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”¹

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“If one tried to reckon with the whole of American history at once, one saw only an uninformative blur, a jangle of unrelated parts. But region permitted one to adjust and train one’s vision in a way that uncovered connections, ties, and relations. With particular people in particular places brought into focus, one could build one’s units of generalization outward, from place to subregion to region to nation to hemisphere to planet. With region as the key transitional category, the blur began to sort itself out.”²

-Dr. Patricia Nelson Limerick

As the quotations above suggest, in order to understand what unites us and what divides us we must first comprehend how we come together at the local, regional, national, and transnational levels. Regional and local histories are particularly important for the history of civil rights movement because these case studies explode many of the myths that have emerged from focusing exclusively on national events and leaders. Biographical works on northern leaders, local studies of urban protest movements, and oral histories of northern activists bolster Malcolm X’s contention that the Mason Dixon line actually begins at the Canadian border. While the tone and style of oppression differ in various locales, the PPC caravans demonstrate that people of color have suffered similarly from economic exploitation and racial discrimination.

The spatial and temporal dichotomies scholars and the media have made between

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution” (Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on 31 March 1968), KL, King Papers.

civil rights and black power crumble when one considers the nonviolent school desegregation protests and transportation boycotts in the Northeast and Midwest, some of which predated the well-publicized events in the South. Distinctions between the non-violent South and the violent urban centers of the North and West appear constructed after learning about the gun-toting Louisiana-based Deacons of Defense or the Oakland-based Black Panther Party's survival programs, which provided free breakfasts for hungry students and daycare services for activists.

Debates over binaries like separatism and integration, non-violence and self-defense, race and class appear throughout the history of African Americans' struggle for freedom and justice. For instance, the biographies of black intellectuals like W.E.B. DuBois, Amiri Baraka, and Malcolm X—all of whom traveled widely—reveal that these individuals led fluid, dynamic lives, moving across these binaries throughout their lives as they experienced new people and different places. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham acknowledges in her foreword to an important collection of revisionist scholarship —*Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*—scholars have begun to correct the myths of the movement and challenge the binaries that have divided it:

In the late 1990s, scholars came increasingly to question static and bifurcated regional images—generalizations that equated the Southern movement with racial desegregation and the Northern movement with Black Power and violence. Recent publications and doctoral dissertations point to the range of ideological persuasions, competing goals, racially integrated coalitions, and black separatist agendas that informed communities in every region of the United States in the

² Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Region in Reason" in Ayers, et al, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1996), 84.

1950s and 1960s. This growing body of research proves that there was never a monolithic politics of place; no singular strategy in time.³

Today, scholars are trying to piece together studies of the many different local, grassroots movements that provided the groundwork for the civil rights movement with the more nationally known leaders and the events to form a more complex, multifaceted history of the movement.

In addition to exposing many of these myths, including the histories of different regions and local communities also demonstrates that civil rights activists were always concerned with economic rights. Activists nationwide recognized that the racial discrimination and economic exploitation they faced were inherently linked. As Jeanne Theoharis explains, regardless where one lived,

Segregation meant that blacks [and other racial minorities] subsidized finer schools and regular sanitation, accessible city government, better public transportation, and a wide array of public services for whites. It was taxation without representation, and thus the lunch counter and the bus and the schoolroom were never just about a seat but always about gaining full citizenship and economic equity.⁴

The nine regional caravans to the capital provided poor people from a wide range of backgrounds with the time and space to mingle with one another and recognize how their histories of discrimination and exploitation and their contemporary poverty were linked. While Resurrection City later transformed the National Mall into a display of poverty, the caravans commandeered the nation's highways for a traveling multiracial convention of radical activists. The caravans enabled the diverse group of participants the opportunity

³ See Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, ed., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003), xii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

to leave their troubles at home and exist in a different time and space with new people in exciting places. Surveillance reports and participant testimony concur that the caravans remained relatively non-violent and fostered multiracial, regional coalitions that would cultivate the development of growing local movements.

As a southern, non-violent civil rights organization led by primarily Baptist preachers, SCLC faced a tough challenge when organizing nationally for the PPC. Many SCLC leaders had to temper their southern hospitality and ministerial egos in order to adapt to the regional styles and diversity of the Northeast, the Midwest, and the West Coast. While ministers dominated SCLC and the organization was founded on Christian principles, the staff and leadership toned down their religious affiliations when organizing in the inner cities of the East and West. Since SCLC had the reputation of being a moderate organization, leaders and staff had to convince activists that their goals were radical enough and that the PPC's tactics would be militant enough to meet the expectations of inner-city youth and long-time revolutionary nationalists. As middle-class ministers, SCLC leaders had to downplay their class, and abandoned their normal suits for denim overalls and straw hats, in an attempt to identify with the participants. The organization also faced the new challenge of organizing alongside activists from other ethno-racial groups and sharing the spotlight and the strategy table with Chicano, American Indian, and white Appalachian leaders. Preparing local communities and the wide range of participants for journeys, some of which lasted more than a week, would require a massive nation-wide mobilizing and organizing effort on the part of SCLC staff, regional leaders, and local volunteers.

MOBILIZING NATIONALLY: ADVERTISING THE CAMPAIGN

In the wake of King's assassination, many questioned whether SCLC would still go through with the campaign. SCLC's Speaker's Bureau established the Educational Task Force—composed primarily of volunteers from the Peace Corps and Vista, ministers, seminarians, and concerned citizens—which aimed to educate and involve Washington residents. The Bureau used the mass media and delivered speeches in the D.C. area to publicize the PPC's plans, educate the public on the causes and effects of U.S. poverty, and inform the non-poor about ways they could participate in the movement.⁵ The Task Force also produced its own nationally distributed pamphlets and newsletters, which stressed the dire nature of the cause and emphasized the multi-racial nature of the campaign, encouraging all Americans to become involved in the PPC.

One brochure pictured black, Indian, and Mexican American children and an elderly Mexican-American worker with the headline “The Time to Act Is Now!” followed by a quotation from King calling for an end to the poverty and racism that, “cause families to be kept apart. Men to become desperate, women to live in fear, and children to starve.” King provided not only a rousing call to inspire activism, but also issued a challenge to Moynihan's assertion that the contemporary breakup of the black family was rooted in cultural and behavioral patterns established during slavery. Instead, King's statement countered that poverty, which he defined as a structural problem rooted in racial discrimination and economic exploitation, led to the problems within black families.

⁵ “Fact Sheet-The Educational Task Force,” May 11, 1968, KL, SCLC 177:38.

Another brochure explained the basic plan for the campaign and provided information on how one could join the PPC, encouraging people to organize in their local communities, volunteer to travel to D.C., or simply contribute money or goods to the campaign. This pamphlet provided statistical information that defined who the poor were, along with detailed descriptions of their dilapidated living conditions. SCLC's publications challenged stereotypes of the lazy poor, insisting that most poor people worked or wanted to work and that they were poor not from a lack of effort but because they lacked power. To demonstrate the institutional nature of racism and economic exploitation, the pamphlet included a comparison of the annual incomes between the rich and poor. Having demonstrated the need for change, the brochure concluded by emphasizing the hypocrisy of poverty in one of the wealthiest nations in the world.⁶

While the Educational Task Force tried to reach the mainstream, other SCLC staff targeted particular populations. For instance, Stoney Cooks tried to reach the nation's college students and convince them to dedicate their summer volunteering for the PPC. Cooks recounts how the PPC reframed his and many others' expectations for the movement as a whole. Although specific demands were made of Congress, Cooks and others argued that the success of the campaign should be measured according to its ability to involve poor people:

. . . if they got together and if they dialogued and if they worked and acted in concert . . . bringing together of massive poor black, white, Puerto Rican was important. If you could do that it would be success.⁷

⁶ "The Poor People's Campaign" accessed from: http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/adams/vga044_3.jpg (accessed September 4, 2005).

⁷ Stoney Cooks interviewed by Katherine Shannon 7/17/1968, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #260.

Unity among the poor was Cooks' major goal for the PPC, but he also thought it was important to involve the non-poor.

Since he was responsible for mobilizing college students nationwide, Cooks had to convince white students that they should play a part in the PPC. Doing so would prove to be a difficult task since many young whites felt the movement had rejected them, as organizations like SNCC took a more militant and separatist stance. But Cooks tried to explain to these well-meaning white liberals that they had not really been kicked out of the civil rights movement because they had never really participated in great numbers in the first place, and that the PPC welcomed their participation. He faced the added challenge of convincing black students that the PPC was, in fact, a radical rather than a moderate movement since it sought a radical redistribution of wealth and promised to use civil disobedience to reach this goal. He tried to persuade all students that their worlds needed to collide with the poor in order to understand poverty and that one way to do this was to travel to D.C. and stay at Resurrection City alongside the poor.⁸

Special brochures were prepared to introduce students to the possibilities of the PPC and to remind this generation that young people had been the vanguard of many social justice movements. Cooks encouraged students to see participation in this social movement as an educational experience and promoted two specific student projects. The first option was a Work-Study Seminar, which provided students with an opportunity to study “the structural, ideological, and social-psychological dynamics of the political process” and “conduct in-depth studies of the same dynamics of mass movement and its implication and effects.” The other program was the Summer Task Force, which offered

students the opportunity to serve as volunteers for a two-month intensive organizing project in local communities in the areas of political activity, economic development, community organization and mobilization, research, office work, and rural and urban education. Students could also participate more informally in direct action protests, recruitment of participants, volunteer services, as well as holding discussions, meetings, and demonstrations on their campuses to gain support for the PPC, making the movement simultaneously local and national.⁹

PPC organizers believed that D.C. residents' participation was vital for the success of the campaign. SCLC and local organizers understood that many D.C. blacks were considered militant and were reportedly skeptical of the PPC because SCLC was recognized as a moderate organization.¹⁰ Several flyers used militant rhetoric to appeal to the increasingly popularity of black power and to demonstrate the radical nature of the PPC. One showed young black men with their fists in the air beneath a slogan that declared, "Let's Have a Revolution! A REAL Revolution." The flyer defined revolution as "a change in structure, not a reform, and is not necessarily brought about violently"

⁸ Stoney Cooks Interview.

⁹ KL, SCLC, 180:11.

¹⁰ In addition to reaching out to black radicals and more moderate minority group organizations, SCLC also sought support from other types of political and community groups, such as the UPO, the United Planning Organization, a private nonprofit human service corporation designated as the community action agency for Washington, D.C. While the UPO supported the PPC, its administration established guidelines for all UPO employees with regard to the PPC, insisting that "the decision to conduct a demonstration must be a decision of the neighborhood group, and not of staff workers," second, that the neighborhood must conduct the protest, with support from UPO staff, and third, that no UPO staff member could "under any circumstances participate or encourage a demonstration likely to result in physical violence, destruction of property, or physical injury to persons." Memo from Wiley A. Branton to All UPO Employees, April 3, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:20.

and appealed to the increasing focus on racial pride and its connection to masculinity, declaring:

The people already involved in the Poor People's Campaign have abandoned fear and are struggling to revolutionize, but they need your help. Jail or no jail, we have to demand our rights or we will continue to be Uncle Toms, believing the white man when he tells us that a black man is half a man. There can be no revolution until YOU become a revolutionary and act to bring about the needed changes.¹¹

Guilt-laden calls for taking personal responsibility for combating racism and poverty appeared in countless flyers.

One made a direct appeal to black radicals, while severely chastising black moderates. Below the heading, "Take a Look at 'Tom'" appears a drawing of a black figure bowing to a white one. The flyer goes on to describe different types of "house niggers," critiquing those blacks that have "made it" but have abandoned their communities, declaring that this rare type of Uncle Tom "thinks he's so damn smart that he is superior to all white honkies and black folk." The second type of Tom were those who said to go slow and not demand everything at once, while the third type of Tom are those willing to accept a fraction of what they need rather than demanding all that all their needs are met.¹² While radical activists had critiqued SCLC for being a bunch of middle-class who pandered to liberal whites, the organization was using this same rhetoric to display their militancy.

A flyer announcing a local rally at the PPC Action Center, located at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Washington, tried visually to demonstrate that the sharp dichotomies many people made between civil rights figures and black power figures were artificial. It

¹¹ "Let's Have a Revolution! A REAL Revolution." KL, SCLC, 177:3.

pictured not only the recently slain Martin Luther King, Jr., but also the more militant martyrs of the movement Malcolm X and Medgar Evers. To engender a sense of accountability and inspire young blacks to fill the shoes of these fallen leaders, the brochure demanded, “What are you doing about your freedom everyday? Act Now! Join the Poor People’s Campaign! Decide to Be Free!” Depicting these three leaders next to one another, organizers attempted to convince skeptical radicals that all three would have supported the goals of the PPC, despite their different degrees of militancy.¹³

An open letter to local D.C. blacks chastised and challenged the local community’s fear and its apathy for the PPC. In explicit terms, the flyer demanded, “YOU KNOW YOUR PLACE, DON’T YOU NIGGER? AND YOU’RE SCARED TO GET OUT OF IT AREN’T YOU?”¹⁴ The letter suggested that the federal government, primarily through the military, had instilled fear in the black population, which led to complacency and internalized racism. The flyer proposed that activists could challenge the white power structure with their “SOUL POWER” exclaiming, “We can scare the hell out of the government if we just unite. We can’t have power without people—without you. Join the Poor People’s Campaign.”¹⁵ In addition to mobilizing D.C. residents and recruiting student volunteers, the major task at hand was to prepare poor people to travel in the nine regional caravans to the nation’s capital, and this was no easy task.

¹² “Take a Look at ‘Tom’” KL, SCLC, 177:3.

¹³ PPC Action Center, Call for Mass Rally at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. KL, SCLC 177:3.

¹⁴ Many in SCLC had just made the linguistic shift from Negro to black. The use of the n-word in this brochure demonstrates how far the organization was willing to go to persuade poor people to join the PPC.

¹⁵ KL, SCLC 177:3.

ORGANIZING LOCAL COMMUNITIES: PREPARING THE TROOPS

SCLC staff recognized that organizing local communities to support the caravans along their journey was equally as important as mobilizing the nation to support the PPC while it was in Washington. In a letter to community organizers on April 28, 1968, Hosea Williams imparted to local organizers the importance of having the “total city be mobilized to receive the caravan of Poor People on its way to the battle in Washington. It is necessary that a great part of our victory be won before we get to Washington.” SCLC leaders did not see the caravans as simply a way to get the poor people to Washington. They were an essential component of the PPC because they connected the local movements with regional groups and the national campaign. Williams couched the PPC in grand moral terms, reminding participants that, “Dr. King died for this cause and we feel that the outcome in Washington may very well not only determine the future of the non-violent struggle but the destiny of mankind.” He instructed local organizers to concentrate on four primary areas: fundraising among all elements of the population; mobilizing young people and college students through prayer vigils, street dances, and night marches; committing local businesses and professionals to provide food, clothing, medical needs, transportation, and financial aid for the caravans; and instructing the religious community to conduct non-violent training, raise funds, and secure commitments for housing. Recognizing the imposition SCLC was making upon local communities, Williams explained that if SCLC had to pay for the total transportation costs, which were estimated at \$1,235,000, the organization would be forced to cancel the campaign.¹⁶

¹⁶ Hosea Williams, “Mobilization of Your Community,” April 28, 1968 KL, SCLC, 179:5.

SCLC provided community activists with a wide range of ways that they could participate in the PPC other than going to D.C. Organizers distributed a checklist so that activists could sign up for the tasks that best suited their needs. They could choose from forming local coalitions with other activists, fundraising, collecting non-perishable food, recruiting participants, distributing information, encouraging letter writing campaigns and phone-ins to Congressmen, planning local demonstrations, holding discussions in churches and other community centers, conducting non-violent training workshops, or securing legal and medical aid, transportation, childcare, and other volunteers.

Before participants could participate in the PPC, they had to sign a pledge of non-violence.¹⁷ Lawrence S. Apsey, Chairman of the Quaker Project on Community Conflict, initiated the idea for the pledge and outlined the reasons why PPC participants should remain non-violent. In addition to honoring the legacy of Dr. King, they argued that the likelihood of injury or arrest would be lessened, that Congress and the American people would be more open to the campaign's demands, and that demonstrations would be longer and less interrupted. Finally, the proponents of non-violence touted its success, not only in garnering the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s, but also in the more recent and more economically driven Sanitation Workers' strike.

SCLC used Apsey's pledge word for word. Participants who signed the pledge vowed to commit themselves to be nonviolent, to avoid abusive or hostile language, to not resist arrest, and "to obey the instruction of official Campaign marshals at all times." This last item would prove difficult since many of the marshals were young men full of machismo and eager to display their militancy. Participants pledged to remain non-

violent for practical reasons. They did not want to give Congress any reason to deny their demands or provide the police with an excuse to attack participants or throw the campaign out of Washington before their demands were met. If activists broke their pledge, they were warned that they would be forced to “immediately leave the place of provocation.”¹⁸ Many participants were sent home for even minor infractions because SCLC did not want a few individuals to cast a negative light on the entire campaign.

WHY THEY WENT: “I WANT TO GET SOME OF THE THINGS I HAVE NEVER HAD BEFORE I DIE.”

Before leaving on what promised to be an exciting but toilsome journey followed by a month long camp-in, SCLC representatives asked participants to reflect on why they had joined the PPC and what they thought they might get out of going to Washington. Along with signing a pledge of nonviolence, participants filled out registration forms that indicated their basic personal information, how long they intended to stay in D.C., and why they joined the campaign. Some filled out more extensive questionnaires that produced astounding data that demonstrated the dire circumstances many endured. The PPC provided poor people with the opportunity to take their local and regional problems and place them in a national context. For some reason, the overwhelming majority of the registration forms and surveys archived were those of Mississippi participants, but even this small sample of responses paints a clear picture of what it meant to be poor in a wealthy and powerful nation.¹⁹

¹⁷ Pledges, KL, SCLC, 180:18, 19, 20.

¹⁸ KL, SCLC, 44:3

¹⁹ I’m assuming that participants across the country filled out similar forms, but only those from Mississippi were archived. Much of the PPC’s organizing materials were destroyed in

Most participants understood that they were being given a rare opportunity to appear before their national government and to express directly what they needed from their elected representatives. Twenty-eight-year-old Theoshi Ingram of Vaughn, Mississippi explained: “I feel as if we poor people in Yazoo County has been left out simple because they have not had anybody from the County to go speak for us. We need a person from our county to go. It is very seldom that Yazoo County are heard of.”²⁰ While the reasons participants gave for joining the PPC were diverse, taken together they represent the needs of the many different groups of poor living in the “Other America” and the importance of communicating these hidden needs to the rest of the nation.

One major problem the PPC confronted was the unequal local administration of federal programs, especially in the South. Several of the questionnaires revealed that the inadequate relief and unscrupulous management of welfare was a major cause of cyclical southern poverty. Mary Louise Crosby, a twenty-five year old dishwasher, mother, and member of the MFDP from Hattiesburg, articulated the needs of many young mothers and the forces working against them:

“We have to pay so much money to send them to school and sometime I don’t have food for them . . . The wefare won’t support me, and I just have to try and go to Washington and see what I can do. Until the cost of living come down we just can’t make it, and the taxes go up everyday.”²¹

Women and children suffered the brunt of poverty across the nation, with many single mothers struggling to provide for their children without any assistance from the local, state, or federal government. Georgia Bahannah, a sixty-seven-year-old woman from

Resurrection City when the police stormed the place and tear-gassed the remaining participants. Registration forms, KL, SCLC 180: 21, 22; 181:1, 2,3, 4; Questionnaires, KL SCLC, 181:4.

²⁰ KL, SCLC, 180:22.

²¹ KL, SCLC, 180:21.

Grenada, Mississippi insisted that the welfare system was inadequate and described the dilapidated housing conditions, hunger, and rising daily costs many suffered as a result:

I wants to go on the march to Washington to help our leaders protest against poverty. The house I live in is nothing better than a shed, door hanging off, wind comes in from every angle even when I pay gas light and water bills to keep warm and to keep the water from freezing. I am out of \$75 per month. In Grenada County I find children and mothers suffering from malnutrition and can get no help from the welfare.²²

Many participants commented on how the welfare system reached some in need but not those who needed relief most. Hettie Harrison, fifty years old, of Courtland, Mississippi called for reform of the welfare program and made detailed recommendations on how to do so:

Change the welfare way of being handled thro the Board of Supervisors also let all federal money be change from the way are handle now. Ask for all factory job pay 2.50 per hour in order so every factory will make \$100 take home pay. Also, create more job raise age limit till unable to hold a job. Cut out Head Start program. Give this money to unable family that cannot get a job in a welfare form. This is my reason. The needy never get a job in Head Start. Always the one that can afford a piece of bread get a job. Head Start job is always issue of favoritism.²³

As Harrison indicates, the Head Start jobs were highly coveted, yet the PPC was able to help some Mississippians obtain work in government jobs that would enable them to help their communities. For instance, Mule Train leader Bertha Burres Johnson obtained a job with Head Start that led to another position as a community organizer, which enabled her to inform the local poor about available resources, since ignorance of available

²² KL, SCLC, 180:21.

²³ KL, SCLC, 180:22.

government aid was one of the major problems contributing to entrenched poverty in the South.²⁴

Welfare administration was one of the primary problems contributing to the nation's poverty, but it was not the only federal program that needed reform. Several participants commented on how the failures of other federal relief programs left them with no income and unable to pay for their basic needs. A woman from Hattiesburg, forty-seven-year-old Sarah Dock, illustrated the forces working against the disabled, explaining that she had been "rejected over and over again" despite her efforts to prove that she was entitled to Medicare, leaving her without any income and unable to get the medication she needed. Despite his military service, fifty-year-old veteran from Hattiesburg, Benton Dwight, summed up the deplorable plight of many servicemen and the failure of the government to fulfill its obligations to veterans who had made extraordinary sacrifices in defense of their country: "I am a veteran of World War II, and I have been unable to work for two years now, but I cannot receive any help from the Veterans Administration in Jackson, Mississippi."²⁵ Along with veterans and the disabled, the elderly made up a huge percentage of the nation's poor. A retired man from Hattiesburg, Ezra B. Hampton, complained that his pension was not enough for him and his wife to live on and emphasized that the plight of the poor was not that of blacks alone: "We have poor white peoples here in Mississippi as well as colored peoples. We are fightin for poor people."²⁶ The PPC sought to help all of these different groups get the

²⁴ Bertha Burres Johnson, Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006.

²⁵ KL, SCLC, 180:21.

²⁶ KL, SCLC, 180:22.

assistance that they were entitled to as citizens of the United States, regardless of their age, race, or location.

While the majority of the U.S. poor were white, poor minorities faced particular difficulties. For instance, thirty-three-year-old Grenada resident, John Berry, emphasized that southern blacks received unequal treatment in all areas of life, particularly the law:

I am fighting for the negro in America to have equal law, fair housing, fair school education in Mississippi because we want our right to go and come like the other people. Negro be locked in while the other man break law. We want law and order in Miss.²⁷

Many southern blacks recognized that their poverty was not a result of their own lack of effort but that of a systematic repression at the hands of the white power structure.

Virginia Robinson, a seventy-four year old experienced activist from Hattiesburg, who had no income and no hot water or in-door bath fixtures and who received no welfare or social security except food stamps explained how whites had destroyed all that she had worked for:

Once I own my own home in the 40's. I own a farm, stocks, and plenty of land. But the white people taken it away. They killed my cattles, horses, and chickens. And next they said if I didn't move away I would be next. So I was forced to leave everything I owned.²⁸

While the majority of Americans subscribed to the culture of poverty thesis which suggested that poor people were lazy, apathetic, and thus responsible for remaining stuck in a cycle of poverty, testimony from participants clearly reveals that the white power structure—at the local, state, and federal levels—played an active role in keeping minorities poor.

²⁷ KL, SCLC, 180:21.

²⁸ Ibid.

Participants of all ages recognized that access to their basic needs should be a right of citizenship. Nineteen-year-old Tommy Bullock from Hattiesburg, Mississippi explained, “Because I feel that all people should get fair and equal money for their home, food, and other personal needs. I want to go to Washington to protest this,”²⁹ while eighty-six-year-old Mattie Killingworth summed up the sentiments of many elderly Mississippians:

I have lived in Mississippi 86 years and have had the worse of everything. Worse house to live in, poorest food to eat, poorest bed to sleep in, poorest heating system. Suffered all my life to raise my child. Had to send them to the poorest school, they got the poorest education. I don't have but a few more days to live. I want to get some of the things I have never had before I die.³⁰

For many, the PPC provided participants with their first real chance to articulate their problems on a national stage.

In addition to the registration forms, some participants filled out more extensive questionnaires that asked for more detailed information. These questionnaires paint an extremely stark picture of what it meant to be poor in 1968. Both registration forms and questionnaires indicated that most participants had few if any resources to help them get by. When asked to fill in their annual income, the overwhelming majority of participants listed none, while a few listed incomes that ranged from a few hundred dollars a year to the high of about \$2,000. All of these people were well below the national poverty line, which for a family of four was approximately \$3,000 in 1968.

The questionnaires provided detailed information about living conditions, such as whether or not participants owned their own home and, if not, how much rent they paid,

²⁹ Registration Forms, KL, SCLC, 180:21, 22; 181:1,2,3, 4.

³⁰ KL, SCLC, 181:1.

and whether the house they lived in had hot and cold running water or in-door bath fixtures. Out of the approximately 140 questionnaires archived, only forty-three reported owning their own home—the key to financial stability in the United States—while eighty-two said they rented; of these, only fifty reported having indoor fixtures and both hot and cold water. Some of the questions regarding living conditions seemed directed toward poor rural southern blacks, such as whether the participant had ever been a sharecropper, presently lived on white-owned land, or had ever been evicted from white-owned property. Eighty-three of the respondents indicated that they had at some point been sharecroppers, while forty-two currently lived on white-owned land. Interestingly, only twenty-two reported that they had been “put-off white-owned land,” but the retaliation blacks experienced for their activism might have made some reluctant to disclose this type of information. The questionnaires also dealt with health issues, asking participants to list the last time they and their families had seen a doctor or visited a dentist. Again, the overwhelming majority had never seen a doctor or dentist. Understanding the extent of poverty throughout the nation was a vital component of the PPC since many middle-class Americans assumed that poor people were receiving what they needed from the government if they were unable to provide for themselves.

Participants’ responses on the questionnaires supported the testimony of others who claimed that government assistance was failing to reach those in most need. The responses participants provided to questions concerning whether they received any social security benefits, welfare checks, or food stamps were staggering. Only twenty participants reported that they were receiving any form of Social Security, while 117 indicated they received none. Twenty-five people replied that they received welfare, with

six receiving ADC benefits, but 104 of the respondents indicated that they received absolutely no relief. Even the new Food Stamps program only reached forty-two participants, while eighty-six others reported that they could not afford the two dollars required to purchase the stamps and were reliant instead on the insufficient surplus commodities program, if available. When asked whether the participants had any experience with anti-poverty programs, such as Head Start or Job Corps, twenty-eight reported participation with Head Start, and a handful indicated that they had worked with Job Corps, NYC, Title 5, or other poverty programs, but the majority had no connection with the War on Poverty programs.

The questionnaires also helped SCLC get a sense of the participants' prior activist experience. The majority of participants (eighty-two) had participated in previous civil rights actions, and almost half of them had been arrested for protesting. Consequently, most of the participants in this pool were prepared for the campaign. Even those who had not been active in the movement stated that they were prepared to go to jail, with only twenty of the almost 140 respondents reporting that they were unprepared for this outcome. Finally, SCLC asked whether participants would be able to support themselves while participating in the PPC, to which only thirteen participants responded that they were capable of funding themselves.³¹

While the questionnaires allowed participants to articulate their needs and why they wanted to go to Washington to protest, the campaign itself would provide poor people with a free trip outside their home state, three square meals a day, shelter, and medical care. The caravans to the capital would enable participants to communicate

directly with Americans across their path and the time and space to forge friendships and alliances with one another. While the participants were excited to hit the road, others were terrified of the impending caravans of poor people.

EARLY RESISTANCE TO THE PPC

Some protested the PPC's entrance into the nation's capital because they felt the poor were simply unworthy of help, while many thought it was unnecessary because they were unaware of the magnitude of U.S. poverty or assumed that the poor were receiving all the help they needed. The PPC met resistance from many different forces—the press, the White House, the Justice Department, the FBI, Washington, D.C. officials and law enforcement, local police and community residents throughout the nation—but no group feared and protested the Poor People's Campaign more than Congress.

Before the PPC participants set off for Washington, legislators were making moves to prevent the campaign from taking place in the nation's capital. Southern senators led the battle against the PPC, with Louisiana Senator and Majority Whip Russell Long pledging to censure or expel any senator he caught “bending the knee” to the campaign. West Virginia Senator Robert C. Byrd had joined forces with Mississippi's John Stennis to persuade Justice Department to file a court order prohibiting the campaign from entering Washington. In the House, nine representatives joined Florida Republican William C. Cramer in his efforts to ban the PPC from using federal parklands, while Nixon—hot on the presidential campaign trail and touting his own

³¹ KL, SCLC, 181:4.

program of “black capitalism”—warned Congress not to concede to the activists’ demands.³² As a *Newsweek* article titled “Civil Rights: ‘Do or Die’” reported, SCLC’s only response was that they “could promise only that its own people would be non-violent—not that the whole pageant would come off without striking sparks.”³³ With SCLC touting the campaign as a last-chance effort to avoid national chaos and destruction, it was no wonder that Congress found the campaign threatening.

An article titled “A Threat of Anarchy in Nation’s Capital” reported that a group of senators investigating the spring riots had reported to Congress that black militants were plotting to take over the campaign and “incite rioting and violence.” Arkansas Senator, Democrat John L. McClellan, an ardent segregationist and chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, led this assault on the PPC, alleging that the same “subversive agitators” that had supposedly fostered the riots that swept the inner cities were leading the PPC.³⁴ McClellan had recently introduced an omnibus crime bill that called for stronger gun control and anti-rioting legislation, as well as increased police training and virtual free reign for the White House to use electronic surveillance against activists. According to civil rights historian Gerald D. McKnight, “McClellan had no compunction against using the PPC to parade his scapegoating thesis about the cause of urban unrest and to whip up a false hysteria for his own legislative purposes.” Despite McClellan’s efforts to vilify the PPC, FBI officials came up empty-handed when trying to verify his accusations.³⁵

³² McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 85.

³³ “Civil Rights: ‘Do or Die’” *Newsweek*, May 6, 1968, 30-32, 31.

³⁴ “A Threat of Anarchy in Nation’s Capital” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 20, 1968, 47-49.

³⁵ McKnight, 86-88.

Democratic Senator Robert Byrd was probably the most persistent opponent of the campaign. On the eve of the caravans' departures, Byrd ranted:

“In my opinion there is no legitimate reason for the march on Washington. It can hardly serve a constructive purpose. It will place an additional burden upon the already overtaxed metropolitan police department. It can inconvenience the citizenry and interfere with the orderly operations of the city . . . I feel that the purpose of the march is to intimidate and pressure Congress into passing unwise legislation, and I also feel that the promoters of the march hope to gain publicity for themselves.”

Byrd was correct; the purpose of the PPC was to intimidate Congress and to garner publicity for poor people. The goal was to expose the poverty that existed in one of the richest nations in the world. While many of the participants would have also agreed with Byrd when he argued that, “legislation cannot confer status on anyone,” most would have disagreed with his assertion that “this must be earned through effort and proper conduct.”³⁶ The participants demonstrated that they were more than willing to put forth effort—camping out for months on the nation’s lawn, often in rainy, muddy conditions, to protest poverty. But another fundamental goal of the PPC was to persuade the nation that poor people deserved equal opportunity and equal access to resources regardless of whether they adhered to white middle-class standards of “proper conduct.”

In fact, the leaders of the PPC touted the campaign as the only alternative to more rioting. The April riots that swept the D.C. area, which had left eleven dead and more than 1,200 injured and had caused more than \$19 million, set a hostile tone for the PPC. Byrd labeled Washington D.C., with a two-thirds black population and one of the highest crime rates in the nation, “a paradise for animalistic hoodlums,” reinforcing centuries

³⁶ “What’s Wrong With a ‘Poor People’s March’: Interview with Robert C. Byrd, Senator From West Virginia,” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 6, 1968, 72.

old racist ideologies that cast people of color as primitive, hyper-aggressive “Others.” Government officials’ irrational, racialized fear prompted the city to prepare for an all out war with the poor rather than fulfilling the president’s promise to wage a war against poverty. Over 1,000 National Guardsmen and 8,000 federal troops stood on reserve to greet the caravans of poverty pilgrims once they reached the nation’s capital.³⁷

The White House was not as aggressive in protesting the PPC, but the president and his cabinet did not support the campaign. After King’s assassination the majority of White House aides supported the idea of Johnson addressing the Congress with the Kerner Commission’s findings and calling for new legislation and funding to improve housing, education, employment, and health care for the nation’s poor in order to avert future rioting. Joseph Califano proposed revisions to the budget, requesting \$5 billion for domestic social programs, but as the nation moved deeper into an expensive and controversial war, Congress became increasingly unsympathetic to the administration’s request for a temporary ten percent tax surcharge to help cover the costs of the war abroad and social programs at home. Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, Arkansas Democrat Wilbur Mills bargained with the White House and insisted that Congress would pass Johnson’s tax hike only if he cut the domestic budget by a billion more than Califano had initially requested. Mills and his cohorts won as the President signed the Revenue and Expenditure Control Act.

Once it became clear that funds for domestic programs were frozen, Califano directed cabinet members to respond to the PPC’s demands by emphasizing what the administration had already accomplished, its pending anti-poverty legislation, and its

³⁷“A Threat of Anarchy in Nation’s Capital” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 20, 1968, 47-49.

plans for future actions, excluding any specific commitments. In his detailed study of the government's massive surveillance and counter intelligence program directed against the PPC, historian Gerald D. McKnight characterizes the government's strategy as follows: "the president's domestic affairs management team had its game plan ready: an invitation to dialogue, compassionate rhetoric, and, in the words of one staffer, 'some small victories if possible.'" He describes the government as being stuck in a "siege mentality," with officials focused solely on "developing an early warning system to predict urban revolts" and "holding secretive strategy sessions" where Justice Department, the Pentagon, and the Secret Service, D.C. mayor Walter Washington and his staff plotted their response to the PPC. It was clear from the beginning that neither Congress nor the White House had any intention of giving the PPC participants what they needed.

While Congress tried to block the PPC from entering the capital and the White House prepared its diplomatic relations, the Justice Department created the Interdivisional Intelligence Unit (IDIU) to monitor the campaign's every move. McKnight describes the IDIU as "a national center to collect and analyze high-grade intelligence to predict when the next ghetto would blow." The IDIU emerged out of an Oval Office that he describes as "obsessed with proving that these disorders were the work of a relatively small handful of subversive conspirators in the black community." Radicals like Stokely Carmichael were the initial targets of the IDIU, but Attorney General Ramsey Clark virtually transformed the Justice Department into what McKnight has called "a national command post for surveillance of the nation's black community." While the IDIU might have remained a secret, the surveillance of the PPC was so

extensive that most participants probably were well aware of the plain clothed white men that appeared at each stop. But the IDIU was just one of many government organizations that performed extensive and unwarranted surveillance of the PPC.

The FBI, military intelligence, and the Justice Department, as well as state and local police, reported on every detail of the caravans' movement and activities. The caravans' itinerary, the number of participants, and the carrier and license plate numbers of the buses were recorded and distributed to each department. Originally, the FBI was only interested in documenting the actions of the PPC's leadership, but as the caravans headed toward Washington, the Bureau began collecting the names of participants. In addition to relying on numerous informants, the FBI and U.S. Army military intelligence divisions performed photo-surveillance at each stop. These photographs were then compared to the bureau's Black Nationalist Photograph Album in an attempt to find and expel black radicals from the PPC.

The FBI was the organization that made the strongest attempt to disrupt and defame the PPC. McKnight maintains that the Bureau's daily summaries stretched to find salacious details to include, describing them as bordering on "pure invention—the contrived products of a disinformation campaign to manipulate the government's perceptions." As was true for many of the FBI's programs during J. Edgar Hoover's reign, particularly COINTELPRO, the PPC surveillance was intended to fit with Hoover's hypothesis about all radical groups. As McKnight explains,

The Hooverized version of the daily activities surrounding the caravans was tailored to emphatically prove that the director's warnings about the potential for

violence were correct—the barbarians were at the gates! ... The Black Menace had replaced the Red Menace as America's number one internal security threat.³⁸

Yet like the Red Menace, the threat of a “Black Menace” was more fabricated than real.

The caravans, as we shall see, were relatively peaceful.

In order to prevent conflict along the PPC caravans, the Justice Department's Community Relations Service Division (CRS), appointed agents to assist each caravan and its leaders. To ensure a smooth arrival for each caravan, CRS agents traveled in advance to check in with the local SCLC staff to assist in preparing all of the accommodations before the weary travelers arrived.³⁹ They also tried to help prevent any local resistance from disrupting the caravans but were not always successful. Activists continued to experience repression from both local and federal law enforcement agents.

The Steering Committee Against Repression (SCAR)—a coalition of members from SNCC, SCEF, SSOC, MFDP, the Delta Ministry, CORE, SCLC, the Highlander Center, LCDC, LCCR, SDS, and NMC concerned with repression against activists—urged SCLC to make resistance to state-sponsored repression a focal point of the PPC. At their meeting in Knoxville, Tennessee on May 4-5, 1968, SCAR called upon SCLC to

³⁸ McKnight suggests that Clark hoped to use Justice Department, FBI, and military reports to create “a ‘master index’ organized around a city-by-city scheme on ‘individuals and organizations,’” which would be computerized in order to establish a central database. Even Assistant Attorney General John Doar, a noted advocate for civil rights, got swept up in the surveillance mentality. He proposed that War on Poverty workers be tapped to provide the IDIU with information on activists. While Doar recognized the contradictions in exploiting poverty workers for surveillance information, he suggested that the Justice Department could preserve its supposed “‘credibility with the people in the ghetto’” by preventing exposure of the IDIU. See McKnight, 93-94, 98.

³⁹ See McKnight, 99-100. The CRS was first established under Title X of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and later transferred from Commerce to the Justice Department in 1966, helped maintain order along the caravans. In 1968, Roger Wilkins became director of the CRS, which made him the highest-ranking black man in the Department. The CRS was designed to serve as a mediator

include in the PPC's demands specific items protesting political repression, which included:

- 1) Amnesty be granted to all political prisoners—including black militant leaders, draft resisters and other anti-war activists, and all those arrested in last year's uprisings and this year's rebellions following the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 2) An end to denial of bail and the setting of new high bonds in cases involving dissenters; instead the establishment of a new uniform bail system throughout the United States—not based on money, but rather on people
- 3) The abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (the Eastland Committee), the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee (the McClellan Committee) and all other inquisitorial government bodies, state as well as federal
- 4) The repeal of all current repressive legislation such as the McCarran Act and the federal anti-riot statute, and the defeat of pending repressive legislation, particularly S. 2988 (the Eastland Bill).⁴⁰

But the PPC failed to make state suppression of political protests a central focus of the campaign, despite the fact that they experienced intense government surveillance and some local resistance.

The caravans were remarkably free of conflict, but some local people did protest the PPC as a caravan made its way through their city or town. For instance, in Boston 1,000 poverty marchers on their way to Washington encountered what *Time* magazine described as a “self-styled ‘Polish Freedom Fighter named Joseph Mlotz-Mroz, 53” who carried a sign reading, “I Am Fighting Poverty, I Work! Have You Tried It?”” The magazine reported that, “in a sorry scuffle, the bow-tied anti-protester was stabbed and

between civil rights activists and their adversaries in an attempt to avoid legal action whenever possible.

hospitalized in fair condition.”⁴¹ Along with this minor clash, SCLC also sent a telegram from the National Poor People’s Campaign Steering Committee to Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and Senator Eugene J. McCarthy regarding the arrest of Reies Tijerina. SCLC leaders interpreted Tijerina’s arrest as part of a larger campaign of political repression against the PPC. They demanded that the charges brought against Tijerina be dropped, while rhetorically displaying their commitment to multi-racial unity in the campaign:

Brother Tijerina, a member of this committee, has been subjected to a continual pattern of persecution and intimidation, and we are deeply concerned about harassment of him and any other participants in the Poor People’s Campaign of nonviolent action. As a united campaign representing poor people of all races, creeds and nationalities, we call upon you to demonstrate your concern for the poor by using the full powers of your office and your position to act against all persecution of Brother Tijerina and others in this campaign, and to support our demands for the immediate release on their recognizance of Brother Tijerina and his associates and the dropping of charges against them.⁴²

Despite these incidents of political repression, most local communities welcomed the caravans with open arms, even in the South.

Where southern law enforcement had been the greatest obstacle to the early civil rights movement’s public protests, by 1968 many southern communities took a different approach to civil rights campaigns. CRS reports indicated that PPC participants called southern law enforcement officials “helpful and courteous” and reported that “their presence has been welcomed by the caravan leaders.”⁴³ While these reports paint a picture of a safe and hospitable South, many participants still feared pockets of the rural

⁴⁰ Report on SCAR meetings in Knoxville, Tennessee May 4-5, 1968; News from Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) May 13, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:6.

⁴¹ “Challenging the Pharaoh,” *Time*, May 17, 1968, 35.

⁴² Telegram from SCLC to Attorney General’s office 4-28-68, KL, SCLC, 179:10.

South. Milton Garrett, a participant on the Freedom Train, describes his stay in Marks, Mississippi before departing for Washington as anything but helpful and courteous: “When we went down to Marks, Mississippi, they told us we had to stay together; at least two of us had to be together at all times. They made sure we were close when dark came. Real dangerous.”⁴⁴ SCLC hoped to ensure that the campaign remained free of violence or disorder by training the participants in non-violence and organizing at the local level so that at each stop the caravans were warmly welcomed and all of the weary travelers had their basic needs provided.

THE CARAVANS TO THE CAPITAL

The caravans not only helped the participants who journeyed to Washington, they also put local communities in the national spotlight as the media covered the PPC’s rallies and in their towns and cities. On May 1, SCLC kicked off the second stage of the Poor People’s Campaign with a demonstration honoring their fallen leader at the site of King’s death in Memphis. Sanitation workers, local activists, and PPC participants joined Rev. Abernathy as he placed a plaque at the Lorraine Motel in honor of Dr. King. Memphis residents boarded buses and traveled south to Marks, Mississippi where two days later the marchers from Memphis would board the “Freedom Train,” and travel to D.C. But the Southern Caravan was the first to leave, kicking off its journey on May 5 out of Edwards, Mississippi. On May 8 the Midwest Caravan would leave from Chicago, and the following day the Eastern Caravan would head south from Boston. Three legs of the Western Caravan, two from Los Angeles and one from San Francisco, headed out in

⁴³ McKnight, 102.

⁴⁴ Milton Garrett Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Memphis, Tennessee, September 1, 2006.

the following days converging with the Indian Trail from Seattle in St. Louis for the remaining journey to Washington, D.C. The final and most dramatic caravan (and the subject of chapter five)—the Mule Train—finally left its home base in Marks, Mississippi on May 13, almost a week behind schedule due to complications with the outdated form of travel and weather delays.

SCLC planned a tight but flexible schedule for the nine regional caravans and established specific guidelines for the leaders of each caravan to ensure order and timeliness. Breakfast would be served from 8:00-9:00, followed by a march from 9:30-10:30, and then the loading of buses from 10:30-11:00, with the goal of having the caravan on the road no later than 11:00. SCLC instructed local leaders to have an established march route set up in and out of each city and to recruit people along the way. Interestingly, SCLC advised that organizers recruit “older people,” perhaps due to fears of having too many rebellious youth, yet the PPC’s leaders admitted that they still had no idea how many people would be participating. They instructed local leaders to have “several local ladies” listen to the radio and track the caravans and phone in with an estimate of the crowd’s size.⁴⁵

While movement veterans were designated as the leaders of each caravan,⁴⁶ young radical black men who promoted self-defense and used the rhetoric of black

⁴⁵ KL, SCLC, 177:8.

⁴⁶ Based on assessments made in CRS reports, Gerald McKnight proposes that the most effective leaders were civil rights veterans. CRS representatives praised Albert Turner, a veteran of the 1965 “Bloody Sunday” assault on the Edmund Pettus Bridge during the Selma voting rights movement and the leader of the Southern Caravan, for holding non-violent workshops along the way. While Turner’s troops were well prepared, CRS reports critiqued A.D. King⁴⁶ for failing to train his participants and for allowing the more militant Milwaukee Commandos to commandeer his leadership of the Midwestern Caravan. See McKnight, 102.

power—many of whom belonged to organizations like the Milwaukee Commandos, the Deacons of Defense and Justice out of Louisiana, and the Memphis Invaders—served as the marshals for several of the caravans. These young men were responsible for ensuring everyone acted in an orderly fashion and that participants remained safe. While placing these young men in positions of power was obviously a good way to engender their support for the campaign, it is curious that SCLC staff would entrust the safety of the participants to young men that most considered violent and militant.⁴⁷ Many of these young men were on board the Freedom Train and were the first to arrive in Resurrection City so they could help build the temporary shantytown while the other participants made their way to the capital.

The Freedom Train

After joining Coretta Scott King at the Lorraine Motel as she laid a wreath at the site of her husband's demise, SCLC leaders and PPC participants traveled some sixty miles southwest into the Mississippi Delta where they arrived on May 4 to protest conditions in one of the poorest towns in the nation, Marks, Mississippi. Organizing in Memphis was easy because the local movement had been strong that spring and remained so in the wake of King's assassination. Milton Garrett, a long-time local activist and a founding member of the militant black power organization, the Memphis Invaders, explained that his participation in the PPC was a natural outgrowth of his local activism:

“I was marching anyway, just for freedom and just for rights for black people. After Dr. Martin Luther King died, they came up here for the Poor People's Campaign,

⁴⁷ For instance, many blamed the Memphis Invaders for the violence and mayhem that ensued on Dr. King's first march with the Sanitation Workers' Strike.

which they had it set up anyway. I just felt like I had to march, I had to be there. They was already here anyway for the Sanitation Workers' Strike."⁴⁸

Garrett emphasized the profound affect marching with the sanitation workers, hearing King give his final "Mountain Top" speech, and seeing the impoverished conditions in Marks had on him and his decision to participate in the PPC and in the movement as a whole.

Railroad companies originally offered to provide engines and cars for the Freedom Train, but due to the weather delays, the caravan finally left for Washington, D.C. on May 7, not by train but by bus, arriving the following day back in Memphis. The Freedom Train's 369 poverty pilgrims pulled into Nashville, Tennessee on the evening of May 8 and marched the last mile to the city coliseum in the rain. The PPC's Interfaith Committee, led by Rev. Dogan W. Williams, welcomed the weary marchers, and Rev. James Bevel spoke to a crowd of between 1,000 and 1,200, informing them of the PPC's goals and demands. The Freedom Train then moved on through Knoxville, Tennessee to Danville, Virginia, which Milton Garrett declared, "wasn't much better" than Marks.⁴⁹ The Freedom Train pulled into the nation's capital on May 12, the first of the nine caravans to arrive. This group of primarily young black men made a quick trek to Washington so they could set to work building the wooden A-frame tents where the residents of Resurrection City would live during their time in the nation's capital.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Milton Garrett Interview.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Caravan Chronicle, KL, SCLC 177:8; Daily Report Poor People's Campaign, May, 9, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

Most of the participants had never been far from home, and few had ever traveled beyond their home state, so the journey allowed participants from different parts of the South to get to know one another and share exciting new experiences. While the participants on the Freedom Train recognized their shared economic and regional experience as poor southerners, they also maintained distinct local identities. For instance, Milton Garrett recounts how he and his fellow Memphis Invaders chose the name to show that they would protect their home turf from outsiders, but insists that despite their reputation as a militant, separatist group, the Invaders formed coalitions with more moderate groups. Another Freedom Train rider, Booker Wright, Jr. of Marks, Mississippi, remembers the collegial attitude of the caravan and how their encounters with people from different areas challenged assumptions others held about their home state:

It was an experience. All types of people were on that crusade . . . Nearly our whole basketball team went, and we played basketball from Memphis throughout. They had created us this name; they'd call people from Mississippi "Sips." And we played ball at Howard University. People couldn't actually believe the skill that the young black kids had having not ever been to Mississippi.⁵¹

Both Garrett and Wright have fond memories of the caravans, but dredging up the past also reminds these middle-aged men of how many of their companions were no longer alive. Wright reported that only three of his teammates who made that journey are still alive today, while Garrett explained that only a couple of the Memphis Invaders were living.

⁵¹ Booker Wright, Jr., Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006.

While the majority of those aboard the Freedom Train caravan were young black men, there were some older people and several families. One young mother from Marks, Mississippi, Augusta Denson, towed along her seven children on the journey, the youngest of whom was only three months old. Denson recounts the fun and vacation-like atmosphere of the Freedom Train. Her family had never traveled outside of the state beyond Memphis, and she remembers how her children delighted in each new adventure that emerged along the caravan and once they reached Resurrection City.⁵²

Not only did the caravan foster a sense of community and feelings of adventure, the Freedom Train also provided the participants with practical goods. Denson recounts how the caravan helped her family and the overwhelming sense of community that resulted from local people, both black and white, meeting the caravans with donations: “That was the good part of it. We got clothes. We didn’t have to go nasty, you know raggedy. We had clothes, food . . . Black people, white people, they’d come out there and get us clothes and food at the caravans.”⁵³ The caravans enabled the participants to broadcast their local poverty to people all along their journey and benefit from individual acts of generosity. While the government might not have met the PPC’s demands, local people responded to the call to end poverty in their own personal ways.

The Southern Caravan

The majority of the travelers on the Freedom Train were young blacks from Memphis or the Mississippi Delta, but the Southern Caravan represented poor blacks, and

⁵² Augusta Denson, Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006.

⁵³ Ibid.

some poor whites, from across the South, picking up new participants as they traveled.⁵⁴ Owen Brooks of the Delta Ministry, although originally skeptical about the efficacy of bringing the poor to Washington, led the Southern Caravan on its first leg from Edwards, Mississippi. The Delta Ministry helped organize the caravan and contributed \$3,000 to the campaign. Andrew Young, the new chairman of the Commission on the Delta Ministry, convinced half of the Delta Ministry staff to join the campaign once it reached Washington, but many of these southern ministers apparently saw the PPC efforts as a lost cause.⁵⁵

Leaving out of Edwards, Mississippi on Sunday, May 5, the caravan made its way into Alabama. Unlike the Western caravans that traveled long stretches at a time, the Southern Caravan was able to make more frequent stops, visiting towns and cities that were civil rights landmarks. Their first major stop was in Selma, Alabama where hundreds joined the initial 120 Mississippians on board for a total of 392 people caravanning in seven buses and ten cars. As the caravan left Selma it stopped on the Edmund Pettus Bridge to pay tribute to fallen civil rights activists Jimmy Lee Jackson, Rev. James Reeb, and Viola Luizzo who died at the hands of white supremacists during the tumultuous 1965 voting rights campaign, and to honor those injured on the notorious “Bloody Sunday,” March 7, 1965 when Alabama National Guard mercilessly beat nonviolent protesters.

⁵⁴ While SCLC was able to organize Appalachian whites, there does not appear to have been many attempts to include poor southern whites. Doing so would have proved extremely difficult because many working-class whites were marshalling the backlash against civil rights activity.

⁵⁵ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 167-168.

SCLC leaders joined the caravan in Montgomery, home of the bus boycott that led to the organization's creation and thrust King into the spotlight. As the group approached Montgomery they abandoned their buses and marched the remaining five miles into the city after which Abernathy spoke at a mass rally at the First CME Church. The following day, Hosea Williams led 300 marchers to lay a wreath at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in memory of King, but officials allowed only a small group to march, apparently due to funeral services for Governor Lurleen Wallace, wife of long-time segregationist Alabama politician George Wallace.

The next stop was Birmingham and then onto Atlanta where Mayor Allen warmly greeted the Southern Caravan and paid his respects to the late King. SCLC put on an all-star benefit with a crowd of approximately 13,000. The participants, who received free tickets, enjoyed entertainment from the likes of Harry Belafonte, the Temptations, the Supremes, and other popular acts of the day.⁵⁶ Participants slept at Morehouse College and the following day visited Dr. King's grave before boarding the buses for Macon.

Government surveillance of the PPC, which was extensive, reported that Hosea Williams wished to slow down the caravan because he worried the participants were becoming too tired with the constant travel.⁵⁷ SCLC's solution was to send just over a hundred participants, primarily those families with small children, on a bus headed directly for Washington, D.C. so that they could join Coretta Scott King and NWRO activists for a Mother's Day march on May 12 to kick off the Washington stage of the PPC. The remaining buses headed to Macon, stopping in Social Circle, Georgia to pay

⁵⁶ Caravan Chronicle, KL, SCLC, 177:8.

honor to two black teachers fired earlier in the year for protesting the conditions at the all-black Social Circle Training School. With 800 participants now in tow, SCLC split the Southern Caravan into four groups and established team leaders for each group and a leader for each bus. From Macon, the caravan traveled on through the South stopping for the night in Savannah, Georgia, Charleston and Greenville, South Carolina, on into Charlotte, North Carolina. On May 14, a crowd of between 2,000 and 2,500 joined the PPC participants in Charlotte for a mass rally with performances by local talent. Hosea Williams gave a thirty-minute speech urging non-violence and warning of the potential repercussions for the campaign if violent outbursts were to occur, but at the same time declared that, “Lyndon Johnson is in for a lot of trouble.”

The caravan now had approximately 375 aboard nine buses, three rented trucks, and seven cars. The Attorney General’s office reported that thirty-five people joined in Charlotte but that caravan leaders expelled nine participants for “drinking, homosexual tendencies, or criminal records.”⁵⁸ From Charlotte, the caravan headed off for Greensboro, North Carolina where the MPD Intelligence Division reported that a black militant with an extensive criminal record and history of mental illness had joined the caravan.⁵⁹ The following day the Southern Caravan rolled into Durham, North Carolina where it received a warm welcome from the local black community and several whites

⁵⁷ Daily Report Poor People’s Campaign, May, 9, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

⁵⁸ Daily Report, May 15, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library. Apparently the Attorney General’s office during this era equated homosexuality with criminal and disorderly behavior, rather than as simply a matter of sexual preference.

⁵⁹ Summary Report of Message Center, May 20-21, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

from the local universities. The participants spent the night in homes and churches in Durham and Chapel Hill.⁶⁰

The Southern Caravan received perhaps its warmest reception on May 17, the 14th anniversary of the landmark desegregation case, in Norfolk, Virginia where ministers raised over \$3,000 in support of the campaign and established a warehouse to collect clothing and non-perishable food to be shipped to D.C. as needed.⁶¹ The local ministers put on two elaborate programs, one at City Hall and another mass meeting at a local church. The City Hall demonstration began with music from local high school bands followed by greetings from the City of Norfolk, the Steering Committee Chairman, and the City Coordinator. PPC leaders and marchers spoke, followed by a presentation on the legacy of Dr. King by SCLC Attorney Joseph Jordan, a recitation of the PPC demands, and a round of the civil rights classic, “We Shall Overcome.” The Norfolk program expressed great gratitude to the PPC, declaring, “We have many poor among us and we thank you for dramatizing our plight and our need.” That evening, a mass rally included entertainment from local bands, folk singers, gospel singers, skits, testimony from local poor people and PPC participants and leaders.⁶² From Norfolk, the Southern Caravan, which now consisted of approximately 388 people, moved on to Richmond, Virginia, and the following day arrived in Fairfax. Churches were the movement’s base, and the D.C. area was no exception. The participants received food and shelter at the Congregational Church of Fairfax and fourteen other churches in Alexandria, Arlington,

⁶⁰ The feds reported that a black officer arrested Leon Hall, an SCLC staff member, on a charge of verbal abuse against the officer, but later dropped the charges. See Daily Report, May 17, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

⁶¹ Ibid.

and Fairfax County, where they engaged in training workshops until May 22 due to overcrowding in the City.⁶³

Participants traveling on the Southern Caravan witnessed first-hand that southern hospitality was alive and well and that local people—both black and white—supported their cause. The caravan enabled local people unable to make the trip to Washington an opportunity to be part of the nation-wide anti-poverty campaign and rally the local community to meet the needs of its poor. Meeting other poor people along the way who were unable to travel to D.C. let the poverty pilgrims know that they were representing not only their own needs but also those of the poor throughout the country. The Southern Caravan remained remarkably free from conflict, in part due to the fact that southern law enforcement chose to protect the travelers rather than harass them as they journeyed through the South. While the Southern Caravan remained amicable, despite young black men's need to assert their local identities, other caravans struggled to produce a united front.

The Midwest Caravan

Like many of the southern participants, travelers on the Midwest Caravan stressed their local identities when confronted with other groups from their region. Yet some of the friction that occurred on this caravan had as much to do with age as location. Like the Freedom Train, the Attorney General's office reported that, "the great majority of the marchers" were males in their teens or twenties; over eighty percent were black and the

⁶² KL, SCLC, 178:19.

⁶³ Daily Report, May 20, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

rest white.⁶⁴ The Midwestern Caravan had two different groups of young black militants who would end up serving as some of the marshals along the caravan and in Resurrection City, the Milwaukee Commandos and the Chicago-based Blackstone Rangers. The caravan was also under the guidance of experienced civil rights activists, and the generational and political differences came to a head along the journey.

On May 8 the Midwestern Caravan leaders Rev. C.T. Vivian and Jesse Jackson, Ray Betz, Fred Benson of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, and Father James Groppi and his Milwaukee Commandos rallied residents from Madison, Minneapolis, and Chicago before setting off on their journey. The Chicago-based *West Side Torch* predicted that the PPC would be “the most powerful confrontation of the people—both black and white—with Congress, the Presidency and Big Business.” The newspaper marveled at the recent promise of unity with the PPC, and exhibited at a conference Abernathy held a week before in New York that included eighty different organizations, among them the National Council of Churches, the United Federation of Teachers, the American Jewish Congress, CORE, the NAACP, and the Urban League.⁶⁵ The Midwestern Caravan headed from Chicago to Louisville, Kentucky, where 300 more participants joined the group. The city government welcomed the PPC participants, inviting them to stay at Freedom Hall at the Kentucky State Fairgrounds—all expenses paid. From Louisville, the group traveled through the idyllic, green countryside on to Cincinnati, where more participants joined the thirteen-bus caravan as they moved along through Dayton, Columbus, and Toledo, Ohio. The growing caravan arrived in Detroit

⁶⁴ Caravan Chronicle, KL, SCLC, 177:8; Daily Report Poor People’s Campaign, May, 9, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

where Former Governor G. Mennen Williams joined Congressman Diggs for the PPC's largest march yet.

As the caravan entered Detroit on May 13, it experienced its first and only violent incident, which initially bonded the group as a united front. After participating in a mass rally, marchers made their way to the civic center, Cobo Hall, located in a predominately black neighborhood, to find police and a tow truck surrounding their stalled communications car. As the standoff between the police and some of the Milwaukee Commandos escalated, local people joined the confrontation and circled the scene. From that point the minor incident escalated rapidly, as Gerald McKnight explains,

Suddenly—virtually from out of nowhere—a column of mounted police appeared. When the crowd refused to disperse after exchanging words with the commander of the horse patrol, the commander reassembled his troops into ranks of four abreast and, according to an FBI source, charged into the crowd at ‘fairly high rates of speed.’ For the next 115 minutes pandemonium reigned outside of Cobo Hall as some of the marchers were clubbed to the ground and stomped by the mounted patrol, bent on savaging the demonstrators.⁶⁶

To make matters worse, police were forcing those hiding out in Cobo Hall back into the street and the path of violence. CRS reports indicated that the melee was “‘a gross case of police overaction’” that resulted in at least fifteen injuries and six hospitalizations.

The following day Hosea Williams, Andrew Young and Rev. John P. Adams of the National Council of Churches appeared in Detroit to quell the anxieties of the frazzled participants.⁶⁷

From Detroit, the caravan of seventeen buses and ten to twelve cars left with approximately 600 participants for stops in Cleveland, Akron, and Canton, Ohio. An FBI

⁶⁵ “Chicago Poor Start For Washington” *West Side Torch*, May 10-24, 1968.

⁶⁶ McKnight, 103.

source described the group as “youthful in appearance, dirty, disheveled, raucous, and many carrying whiskey bottles when boarding the buses,” and sarcastically claimed that these were the “youngest, strongest, healthiest appearing group of poor people” he had ever seen. The source also reported that local blacks who had brought food for the caravan refused to distribute it to these “young hoods,”⁶⁸ just one example revealing the limits of racial unity. An FBI informant explained that serious differences had arisen between contingents from Chicago and Milwaukee. The Chicago group resented the discipline Milwaukee’s Youth Commandos were imposing on the caravan. Rather than having an older, more experienced activist maintain control over the brash youth, A.D. King had allowed two rival groups, known in their cities and to the FBI as gangs, to vie with each other for leadership of the caravan.

After arriving in Cleveland, Ohio, the group enjoyed a free dinner local church members prepared at a school cafeteria and heard a speech from Rev. A.D. King who criticized Cleveland’s black Mayor Carl Stokes for refusing to supply funds for the PPC. The following morning the caravan set off for stops in Akron and Canton, Ohio and arrived in Pittsburgh on Thursday May 16 where University of Pittsburgh students challenged PPC participants in a Frisbee tournament. Surveillance reports indicated that local militant Black Nationalist groups, the Afro-American Institute and the Organizers, attended the rally in Pittsburgh and pledged to join the group in Resurrection City. The Bureau reported that 1,000 participants arrived in Pittsburgh, but other government officials reported that only 500 left Pittsburgh because many “returned home due to

⁶⁷ McKnight, 103-105.

⁶⁸ Daily Report, May 15, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

illness, old age, or general dissatisfaction.”” After arriving in Baltimore on May 18, they decided by majority vote to move on to Washington, D.C. on May 19 where they joined participants from the South in Resurrection City.⁶⁹ Despite their differences, the caravan provided the region’s activists with the opportunity to meet one another and potentially plan for future activities once the group returned home. As they traveled through each Midwestern city, the participants were able to recognize their shared experience of inner city poverty.

The Northeastern Caravan

Midwesterners had difficulty staying unified along their journey but simply organizing for the PPC in the Northeast proved difficult. SCLC’s reputation was weak and the group lacked experience dealing with big city organizing and relating to inner city youth. Many northeasterners shared the goals of the PPC but were skeptical of southern preachers and nonviolent tactics. Cornelius Givens, New York Coordinator for the PPC reported on the initial resistance to the PPC in New York:

The ‘black militants’ in New York City had nixed the Poor People’s Campaign. White folks didn’t want to get down. Nobody wanted to get down, in New York City, with SCLC, not even the welfare mamas. Nobody! Because they felt SCLC would want to dominate and lead and give direction to people, and we are conditioned, in the Northeast, to leading ourselves . . . Folk don’t trust preachers in the North anyway.⁷⁰

While SCLC stressed its connections with the black church in the South, they had to downplay their religious affiliations when organizing in the Northeast. Despite initial resistance, Givens was able to rally enough support to form the New York City

⁶⁹ Daily Report, May 17, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

⁷⁰ Cornelius Givens, New York Coordinator for the PPC, interviewed by Katherine Shannon 7/7/1968, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #223.

Coordinating Council for the Poor People's Campaign, which included peace activists, anti-poverty warriors, welfare mothers, unaffiliated poor people, and anti-establishment citizens in support of the PPC. The New York group wanted to remain independent of SCLC, so they sold buttons depicting a black woman and white baby, which was later published in the *New York Times*, to raise money for their caravan to D.C.⁷¹ They used this image to promote the interracial nature of the PPC, which might appeal to liberal middle-class whites who had money to donate to a worthy cause. The Northerners avoided making any reference to SCLC, fearful that doing so would harm their organizing efforts. The NY PPC remained the most independent and self-reliant regional group throughout the movement's existence.

SCLC struggled with local leaders in New Jersey, as well. A letter from Edith Savage demonstrated that SCLC's southern style was off-putting to many northerners and that East Coast organizations and northern women were not going to let a group of egotistical southern ministers dominate them. Savage wrote:

We feel the inflammatory remarks made by your staff members was an insult to the Trenton citizens who within two weeks rallied for your cause financially, morally, and voluntarily to do a job to receive the poor marchers on their arrival in our city . . . We are asking that you remove your present staff from the Trenton office or we will not continue to keep the office open to continue the work of the Poor People's Campaign.⁷²

While the specific remarks made are unknown, the quote demonstrates how easily SCLC offended activists in the North.

It is likely that many northern activists resented the presence of the media-driven SCLC in their local territories. As the essays in *Freedom North: Black Freedom*

⁷¹ Cornelius Givens Interview.

Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980, and other essays and books on northern movements reveal, activism was always strong in the North, particularly along the East Coast. While SCLC and other southern organizations were constantly in the spotlight, northern activists participated in the tedious day-to-day organizing that grassroots movements require—just like their sisters and brothers in the South who remained in the shadows while middle-class ministers received the media’s attention. Yet the media and scholars have portrayed southern activists—both leaders and the rank and file—as existing on a higher moral ground than northerners. Rooted in the black church and King’s articulation of Gandhian and Christian principles of non-violence, and pitted against an openly violent segregationist whites, southern activists were depicted as leading a just and righteous cause against an evil foe. The myth of racial amity in the North made northern activists seem like angry blacks undeserving of assistance. As Jeanne Theoharis suggests in the introduction of *Freedom North*, it is not only the myth of the North’s kinder, gentler racism that distorts the view of northern movements and activists, it is also results from the culture of poverty and “underclass” theories that connect the supposed pathology of the black family with its migration to the urban centers of the North and Midwest:

Thus, urbanization is tied to the disintegration of the black family—and, by extension, the black community—as urban blacks, particularly black women, are often pictured as non-virtuous and non-righteous . . . These theoretical formulations are tied to racialized ideas of place, work, and progress. Because rural blacks are seen as emblematic of long-suffering struggle, and urban blacks as pathological (divorced from the kin and culture of Southern black life), the narrative of the movement’s demise when it migrates North is self-justifying. In a troubling tautology, a sharecropper can occupy a place of dignity in the American imagination that a welfare mother cannot; thus, the activism of welfare mothers

⁷² Telegram to SCLC from Trenton, New Jersey office, KL, SCLC 178:13.

disappears from view because they cannot hold this place of American hero and symbol of national progress.⁷³

This dynamic Theoharis describes suggests that in addition to being an issue of place, the pathological poor are gendered. Even the white segregationist can admire the hardworking southern black sharecropper because he remains locked in a system that wealthy whites continue to control, while the northern welfare mother is depicted as an undeserving, immoral ward of the state. The PPC would bring both of these groups of the poor together with those from other regions of the United States as a united force demanding entitlement to basic needs for all poor people, regardless of race, gender, or region.

Despite the difficulties SCLC faced the Northeast Caravan managed to be one of the PPC's largest as it traveled the relatively short distance to Washington, D.C. On May 8, fourteen people in three cars left Brunswick, Maine for Boston to participate in the Northeastern Caravan, also frequently referred to simply as the Eastern Caravan. The group kicked off their trip on May 9 as Abernathy and a mule named "Mrs. Louise Day Hicks," after Boston's integrationist mayor, led a rally before the group boarded buses for Providence, Rhode Island where they stopped for lunch and a rally at Roger Williams Park. Local people joined the swelled group of 120 participants as they marched five miles to the JFK Plaza in the center of town where Rev. James Orange of SCLC delivered a speech. Activist Bradford Lyttle wrote to Barbara Dering describing how he and other volunteers donated a car and a bullhorn, as well as a large picture of King, which was strapped on top of the car as the activists broadcast news of the demonstration

⁷³ Theoharis, *Northern Protest*, 6-7.

at Boston Common. The group, which included Peter Gregonis, and Joe and Mary Lou Kearns planned to use this display at each stop along the Northeastern Caravan's journey.⁷⁴ Among the participants was Francis Hoffer, a twenty-four year-old white man who had walked all the way from Las Vegas to Boston to join the Caravan.

On Saturday, May 11 the Northeastern group arrived in New York City and performed a three-hour march from 369th Street Armory to Sheep's Meadow in Central Park. Approximately 125 residents of Spanish Harlem joined the growing contingent of 360 PPC participants as they marched to Central Park. By the time they reached Central Park, more than 600 people, poor and non-poor alike, crowded the streets in the drizzling rain to hear speeches from Abernathy, a Passamaquoddy Indian Chief, and other representatives. Before the group left for Newark, New Jersey, three more busloads from New London, Willimantic, and Hartford, Connecticut joined the caravan. In Newark the group marched from Lincoln Park to City Hall. From Newark, the caravan headed to Trenton, New Jersey where 2,000 supporters joined the 425 PPC participants in a march to the state capital to show support for Gov. Hughes' endorsement of a state takeover of the Newark school system and his proposal to aid welfare mothers. Philadelphia turned out the biggest crowds on the East Coast with approximately 50,000 supporters joining the participants in a four-mile march and rally, as big a crowd as would appear for the PPC's Solidarity March. On Wednesday, May 15 the group left for Wilmington, Delaware with eighteen buses, fourteen private cars, and two trucks. The caravan, which had grown from a mere fourteen to a total of 625 participants, arrived in Baltimore on

⁷⁴ Letter from Bradford Lyttle to Barbara Derning, May 12, 1968, Barbara Derning Papers, Folder # 793, Radcliffe Institute.

May 16 and made their final descent into Washington, D.C. two days later.⁷⁵ The local movements scattered across the East Coast united with one another and with the Southern participants already settled in the temporary shantytown, but to make the PPC a truly national movement, the Western half of the nation had to be included, as well.

The Western Caravans

Originally, SCLC had not even planned to organize in the West, assuming that it was too far for people to travel cross-country, but the region's enthusiasm for the PPC, which spiked after King's assassination, convinced SCLC that they should mobilize aggressively in the region. American Indians and Latinos in the West were arguably the most invisible poor people in the nation. As one traveler on the Western Caravan, Richard Romero, explained,

“Once you cross East of the Mississippi River, people do not even know what a Mexican-American is. People do not know the problems that are encountered by the Mexican-American in the Southwest. So, we felt, because of the national attention that could be brought to our problem.”⁷⁶

The PPC provided Latinos and American Indians with the chance to educate the nation about the region's culture and the different ethnic groups who called the West home.

While SCLC was used to forming interracial coalitions with liberal whites and was learning to organize radical blacks, the organization would struggle throughout the PPC to negotiate the diverse needs of a truly multi-racial campaign. SCLC staff member Tom Houck recounts the difficulty he had as a white man organizing for the PPC on the West Coast. He faced the challenge of convincing some of the most militant blacks in the

⁷⁵ Caravan Chronicle, KL, SCLC, 177:8; Daily Report, May 17, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

country—Ron Karenga’s cultural nationalist organization US, the Black Congress, and members of the revolutionary black nationalist Black Panther Party—that the PPC was a radical movement in line with many of their goals, particularly a radical redistribution of wealth in the United States. Houck explained that King’s death apparently softened the mood of these West Coast radicals who saw the PPC as “the last chance for nonviolence” but worried that “the campaign would not be radical enough for them.”⁷⁷ Yet as was the case in the Northeast, the people who ran the local, grassroots Bay Area Poor People’s Campaign were not SCLC staff but militant blacks, such as the coordinator Sandra Davis who had been active in various radical local groups. On May 15 the group held a huge rally in Oakland at which Abernathy, Jackson, Tijerina, Al Alyen of the American Friend’s Service Committee, and Bobby Seale of the Black Panther Party united on stage and spoke to a crowd of approximately 6,000 to rally support for the PPC’s Western Caravan kick-off, which raised \$10,000 in one night—enough to pay for the transportation for this leg of the group, traveling from San Francisco to D.C.⁷⁸

One reason southwestern communities embraced the PPC might have been because the budding Chicano movement, centered in California, New Mexico, and Texas, was looking for national exposure and connections with other like-minded organizations. The primary leaders of the Chicano movement organized for the PPC in their respective regions but struggled with one another over the title of leader of the southwestern caravans. At the Minority Meeting Reies Lopez Tijerina was appointed chairman of the

⁷⁶ Richard Romero, interviewed by James Mosby 6/11/1968, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project.

⁷⁷ Tom Houck Interview.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

“Brown People of the Southwest” and later met with Tom Houck in New Mexico to make plans for rallying the Southwest for the PPC, but Corky Gonzales was also referred to as “leader of the Southwestern Caravan.” Regardless of their titles, both did a great deal to mobilize the southwestern part of the nation for the PPC. While Gonzales organized in Colorado, using his Denver-based Crusade for Justice as an outlet for the PPC, Tijerina worked throughout the Southwest as an advocate of the PPC

Reies Lopez Tijerina, leader of the New Mexico-based land grant movement, La Alianza, started organizing with blacks in 1967 and had invited representatives of CORE, SNCC, and other groups to join their convention on October 22, 1967. Some of the black power movement’s seminal leaders, such as Elijah Muhammad, Stokely Carmichael, and Ron Karenga attended, but Tijerina complained that King never replied to his invitation. Once SCLC asked the New Mexico leader to join the PPC, he became an exceptional organizer. He recruited 135 from New Mexico, helped establish the committee in Los Angeles, rallied two buses of participants in El Paso, and provided connections for Houck in San Antonio.

In Los Angeles, the grassroots press helped communicate to both black and Mexican American communities why they should send representatives to Washington. A Chicano paper, *La Raza*, published numerous ads for PPC events and explained in both Spanish and English why the PPC was an important movement for Mexican Americans. *La Raza* made a direct connection between the PPC and the Cesar Chavez-led farm workers’ strikes taking place in California using a picture of National Farm Workers Alliance activists marching alongside a field as the backdrop for an announcement of a Sunrise Poor People’s Rally at Will Rogers State Park in Watts as their cover story. The

paper went on to detail the specific conditions Mexican Americans faced and the statistical breakdown of how they fared compared to the rest of the nation. The article suggested that while the roots of their poverty might be different Chicanos should unite with other poor people to combat the systemic aspects of poverty that affected all of the poor. *La Raza* listed demands that were specific to Chicanos that would be presented as part of the PPC, such as bilingual education, but also listed some of the PPC's broader demands that would affect all poor people, like guaranteed jobs or income.⁷⁹

The Western Caravan's central administration was highly organized and provided local communities with detailed instructions on the PPC's goals and philosophy; fundraising and recruiting; travel arrangements; medical, food, and housing needs; when and where to hold rallies; and the many duties of the caravan leaders and bus marshals.⁸⁰ SCLC asked participants to bring with them birth certificates for all children, evidence of residence, marriage licenses, divorce papers, death certificates, social security cards, certificates of ownership or real or real or personal property, welfare ID cards, and employment or citizenship papers so that participants who sought assistance from social service volunteers could more easily access these resources.⁸¹

On May 11 the first leg of the Western Caravan made its final preparations in Compton at the storefront church of Rev. James Mims. The following day Rev. Mims led his small, independent group of thirty-four participants on board an old school bus as they embarked on their journey to the East Coast.⁸² In addition to Rev. Mims contingent,

⁷⁹ *La Raza*, vol. 1, no. 12 (May 11, 1968), KL, SCLC 179:32.

⁸⁰ Memo #1 Western Caravan, May 2, 1968, KL, SCLC 178:21.

⁸¹ Memo #1 Western Caravan, May 9, 1968, KL, SCLC, 178:21.

⁸² Caravan Chronicle, KL, SCLC, 177:8.

the Western Caravan consisted of three separate caravans originating out of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and El Paso. The Los Angeles group of 140 people traveled in four buses to Phoenix and then on to El Paso and Albuquerque before arriving in Denver on May 18. The San Francisco group included one bus of what surveillance reports suggest included primarily American Indians and two other racially mixed buses with the majority of participants under the age of fifty. The Attorney General's office reported that "ten hippies are with the group" and that the caravan's leader, Mark Comfort, was a member of the Black Panthers. This group left for Reno on May 16 and stopped in Salt Lake City before arriving in Denver to unite with the group from Los Angeles.

While the California contingents made their way to Denver, on Saturday May 18 a five-mile march with almost a thousand people in attendance launched the PPC in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Roman Catholic Archbishop James Peter Davis of Santa Fe, Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan of Anchorage, Alaska, the president of the Protestant New Mexico Council of Churches, and a number of American Indian leaders, such as Thomas Banyacya of the Hopi Tribe of Arizona, Mad Bear Anderson of the Tuscarora Indian Nation, Clifford Hill of the Creek Tribe, and Beaman Logan of the Seneca Nation, joined forces for the mass demonstration. Along with these activists, popular stars like Joan Baez and Marlon Brando appeared to demonstrate their support for the PPC and its Southwestern contingent. The following day, the Southwest's delegates met for dinner in Denver's Annunciation Church School, where they received what historian Patricia Bell Blawis deemed "the best meal of the whole trip." The Denver-based Chicano group the Crusade for Justice prepared a turkey dinner that approximately 500 participants enjoyed. The gathering demonstrated the diverse coalition the PPC inspired. Along with Tijerina's

contingent from New Mexico, the group also included Black Panther Party members, a contingent of Californian Brown Berets, and representatives from the Crusade for Justice. While in Denver, the Southwestern caravan held a rally of 5,000 at which Corky Gonzales, Crusade for Justice's Corky Gonzales and Tijerina were met with cheers, while Indian representative Fred Car moved the crowd as he bemoaned his people's fate:

“Nobody knows what poor is, like the Indian. Nobody has seen horses starving and dead on their own land. The only reason I grew up is because I am mad. We are united with the Negro, Mexican and white.”⁸³

The Western Caravan left Denver with a total of 540 participants traveling on fourteen buses headed for Kansas City.

Up to this point, the participants spent most of their time socializing with one another as the landscape transformed outside their windows from lush valleys to empty deserts to immense mountain ranges, but their stops became more frequent as they stopped and held rallies in the major cities of the southern Midwest, such as Kansas City, St. Louis, and Louisville. Another group of forty-two Mexican Americans left out of El Paso aboard one bus, stopping in San Antonio and Dallas before joining the first two groups in Kansas City on May 19. While in Kansas City, the Chicano leaders began to assert their frustration with SCLC leaders who they felt had circumscribed the role of the participants in leading the PPC. The New Mexico delegation held a “sit in” at the Kansas City Livestock Exposition Hall to protest the imbalance in the campaign's leadership and demand at least a few of the spots among the seventeen scheduled speakers. The protest resulted in two of the scheduled speakers dropping out to allow Tijerina a space on the program.

Mark Comfort, Director of the Oakland Direct Action Committee (ODAC), was responsible for twenty-three buses full of a sundry mix of 1,100 people, which proved to be a difficult task. In addition to complaints from the Chicanos about a lack of representation, he ran into problems with people fighting and with some militant blacks who complained about having to ride alongside whites.⁸⁴ Tom Houck recounts that the black participants had “become very militant along the way” because “they felt that they were being left out” and too much “emphasis was being placed on the Mexican-Americans and Indians.”⁸⁵ Throughout the PPC the different ethno-racial groups involved would compete for equal representation as they protested the government for equal opportunity. The various contingents of poor people argued amongst themselves at times, but they united when confronted with a mutual foe, whether it was the government or the PPC’s own leaders

On May 20, the Southwestern caravan made its way into St. Louis, where they received a warm welcome, but tensions persisted. After a long program with several ministers delivering speeches and the chairman of the St. Louis campaign finance committee reading off a list of donors, the entire Western contingent walked out of the mass meeting in protest of the lack of representation of the poor people the PPC was organized to represent. The black, Chicano, American Indian, and white participants from the Southwest caucused in the hallway, determined to more equal representation. In response, the event’s organizers allowed Corky Gonzales to read his epic Chicano poem “I am Joaquin,” which read:

⁸³ Caravan Chronicle, KL, SCLC, 177:8.

⁸⁴ Mark Comfort Interview.

I am still here!
I have endured in the rugged mountains of our country
I have survived the toils and slavery of the fields
I have existed
 In the barrios of the city,
 In the suburbs of bigotry,
 In the mines of social snobbery,
 In the prisons of dejection,
 In the muck of exploitation,
 And in the fierce heat of racial hatred . . .
I SHALL ENDURE!
 I WILL ENDURE!⁸⁶

After a contingent from Texas and a group of black youth from St. Louis joined the Western caravans, Tijerina insisted again that the coalition be led by all of the participants:

“The people that are now joining us are our ZULU and CORE brothers, and our brothers from Texas, and any decisions made on this march are going to be made *together* or not at all. In this caravan we don’t want slave buses, and we don’t want *contratistas*.”⁸⁷

The Chicano and American Indian leaders struggled throughout the movement to have their voices heard and to hold SCLC leaders to their promise of a multiracial leadership.

With another two buses from Oklahoma that carried primarily American Indians, the caravan headed on to Louisville, Kentucky. As the group arrived in Louisville, the passengers aboard the caravans’ nineteen buses grew worried since other groups had experienced harrassment in the city. The caravan had to conduct bomb searches of the buses and baggage after reports that Klansmen had planted explosives on the buses.

When the group arrived in Washington the following day, a group of Puerto Rican and

⁸⁵ Tom Houck Interview.

⁸⁶ Blawis, 118-121.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 22.

Panamanian supporters welcomed the Western caravans with banners reading, “Bienvenidos,” “Veceremos,” and “Viva la Raza!”⁸⁸

The Western Caravan provided blacks, Chicanos, and American Indians with the opportunity to discuss their goals and tactics and determine how their growing movements could help each other. The Western Caravan’s director declared that the participants were true radicals who acted rather than simply talked, as he chastised those who criticized the PPC but did not at themselves:

“Now all of you so-called militants in the background that didn’t come . . . I seen some of the most militants I ever seen in my life, Jack, in all these—I mean all these races were there. People were packing their stuff, they came to die there.”⁸⁹

Poor people from across the West Coast demonstrated how radical they were and challenged the image of the lazy, apathetic poor by traveling across the entire nation to protest their condition.

When interviewed two years after the PPC, Murdock Benjamin, a participant on the San Francisco-based leg of the Western Caravan, reflected on how two of the buses that were full of radical black and Chicano activists would stay with other militant and hold workshops in the evenings, exchanging ideas and contact information to broaden their growing local and regional movements to the national level.⁹⁰ Comfort, declared that the PPC was “the best achievement I’ve seen . . . this is the first time in history of this country, that we were able to get all these races of people in different religions together

⁸⁸ Blawis, 124.

⁸⁹ Mark Comfort, leader Western caravan, interviewed by Robert Wright, Oakland, CA, 11/16/1968, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #338.

⁹⁰ Murdock Benjamin interviewed by Malaika Lumumba 3/19/70 Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #542.

under one tent.”⁹¹ The PPC’s mobilization of a truly multi-racial, national anti-poverty movement was remarkable, but as we shall see holding together such a regionally and ethnically diverse group would prove to be a difficult task.

The “Indian Trail” Caravan

Another caravan that boasted a diverse group of participants was the Northwestern Caravan, deemed the “Indian Trail,” due to its large representation from the Northwest’s Indian tribes. The caravan left out of Seattle on May 17 with seventy-two participants from Portland and Seattle on board two buses headed to Spokane, Washington. The following day the group traveled 590 miles to Billings, Montana, which meant there was no time to hold rallies along the way. From Billings the group headed to Bismarck, and then on to Minneapolis, followed by Madison, and Chicago. Tom Houck recounts that at this stage the caravan included about 150 total, approximately half Indians and half blacks, most of whom were from Seattle and Portland. This group converged with another group in Minneapolis that included American Indian leaders Tillie Walker and Hank Adams, and other Indian Midwestern Indian participants.

In an interview on July 1, 1968, American Indian leader Tillie Walker described the complications she faced when garnering support for the PPC due to the interference of the Bureau of Indian Affairs representatives, who advised that the tribe had too much to lose by participating in the PPC. Walker declared that, “a government agency cannot

⁹¹ Mark Comfort Interview.

get involved in telling people who are very poor not to take part in something like this.”⁹² Many tribal leaders who felt beholden to the BIA resisted organization for the PPC, but individuals on reservations mobilized tribal members despite the warnings. The PPC gave American Indians an opportunity to break free from the constraints of tribal government and join forces with other ethno-racial groups from across the country in a national movement of the poor, which undoubtedly helped provide some of the groundwork for the American Indian Movement.

The coalition of American Indians that participated in the PPC represented a diverse group of tribes from all over the country. American Indian leader Frieda Wagner reported that Cherokee, Chicasaw, Creek, Choctaw, and Ute from Oklahoma; Standing Rock, Sioux from North Dakota; Creek and Blackfeet from Montana; Pomos and Krupas from California; Chicasaw and Navajo from Arizona; Pueblo from New Mexico, and various tribes from Wisconsin all contributed and/or participated in the PPC,⁹³ along with representatives of the Flathead, Yakima, Seneca, Tuscarora, and Hopi tribes.⁹⁴

Along with this diverse group of Indian tribes, the Attorney General’s report singled out three Black Panthers from Portland—James Hill, Melvin Spencer, and Isaac Allen—who were on board the Indian Trail Caravan. Government documents reported that these three men planned to meet with former CORE director James Foreman and poet and activist LeRoi Jones on May 30 in Washington, D.C., so even if radicals were not formally joining the PPC, they were using it as an opportunity to meet and form their

⁹² Tillie Walker & Frieda Wagner interviewed by Katherine Shannon 7/1/1968, Ralph Bunche Civil Rights Oral History Project, tape #231.

⁹² McKnight, 94.

⁹³ Tillie Walker & Frieda Wagner Interview.

own agenda.⁹⁵ The “Indian Trail” and its black radical contingent united with the militant mix of activists aboard the Western Caravans in Columbus, Ohio for the final descent into the nation’s capital.⁹⁶ The caravans from the West arrived in Washington, D.C. in late May and quickly dispersed, with the American Indian and Mexican American contingents lodging at local churches and schools rather than in Resurrection City. As we shall see in chapter six, the unity that the nomadic life of the caravans had engendered could not be replicated once the weary travelers arrived in Washington because the site at the Mall was too chaotic and too overcrowded to accommodate all the participants.

In addition to the nine major regional caravans, other regional ethnic groups traveled independently to Washington. For instance, the white Appalachian groups straggled into D.C. over a period of three or four days. SCLC organizer Ernest Austin insists on how important this coming together was for a group that was so geographically isolated, even from one another, explaining that those in Kentucky had little knowledge of what was going on in West Virginia or Tennessee, and vice versa.⁹⁷ Along with the contingents from nearby Appalachia, Mark Comfort reported that a group of 5,000 Puerto Ricans came down from Spanish Harlem in the largest caravan, with 200 buses in all.⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

Each of the regional caravans provided a sense of the nation’s geographic, ethno-racial, and economic diversity, and how, despite these differences, the nation’s poor had

⁹⁴ McKnight, 94.

⁹⁵ Daily Report, May 17, 1968, Papers of Attorney General Ramsey Clark, LBJ Library.

⁹⁶ Tom Houck interview.

⁹⁷ Ernest Austin Interview

⁹⁸ Mark Comfort Interview. SCLC’s records provided no documentation on this group, perhaps because their journey from New York was so short.

much in common. The caravans served as a vehicle for solidarity among the poor that would last well beyond the existence of the PPC. The trip to D.C. also gave the multi-racial group of poor people something many would have never experienced otherwise—a free ride to the nation’s capital and all of the joy and excitement traveling across the country entailed. Conversations and shared activism with new people, as well as the act of traveling together, helped participants gain a new understanding of the deeper, structural reasons for poverty in the United States. *The New Republic* recognized that the PPC’s diverse coalition was not calling for reform but radical reconstruction of the entire system:

“New Left radicals, black power advocates, American Indians, Mexican Americans, white Appalachians, and middle-class whites in large cities. They want money—but something else, too. They want more control over their environment . . . To these radical conservatives (or radical reconstructionists) the main issue in America is repossessing political and economic self-determination. That is why they want new forms of community government.”⁹⁹

PPC participants joined the campaign in order to represent themselves and fight for the right to control their own destiny and for the freedom of both economic and physical mobility. While many shared the PPC’s goals of guaranteed jobs or income, improved social services, and equal opportunity, participants also had more local and regionally based issues. The caravans to the capital demonstrate how each of the nation’s regions—the South, the North, the Midwest, and the West—has a unique identity and history of activism. Yet, despite local differences, racial minorities in all of these regions share the plight of poverty that is rooted simultaneously in national, regional, and local political and economic systems.

⁹⁹ “Pilgrimage of the Poor,” *The New Republic*, May 11, 1968, 5-6.

The PPC's caravans to the capital enabled activists to build their grassroots movements simultaneously at the local, regional, and national levels. The contacts activists made along their journey and the friendships that ensued as a result of spending up to a week or more traveling together helped Chicanos, American Indians, and blacks forge coalitions, both among members of the same ethno-racial group and with people of different backgrounds. The caravans contributed to the formation of national, identity-based movements, such as the Chicano and American Indian movements and allowed activists to place their local and regional issues in a national context.

The following chapter will explore how the PPC inspired local people in one small Delta community to oppose the white power structure. By exploring this local movement in greater detail and chronicling the journey of the Mule Train's performance of poverty across the South we can better understand how the PPC connected the struggle against poverty at the local, regional, and national levels and how this national anti-poverty movement transformed the small town of Marks, Mississippi.

CHAPTER FIVE

Marks, Mississippi & The Mule Train: Fighting Poverty Locally, Representing Poverty Nationally

“I was in Marks, Mississippi the other day and I found myself weeping before I knew it. I met boys and girls by the hundreds who didn't have any shoes to wear, who didn't have any food to eat in terms of three square meals a day, and I met their parents, many of whom don't even have jobs. But not only do they not have jobs, they are not even getting an income. Some of them aren't on any kind of welfare, and I literally cried when I heard men and women saying that they were unable to get any food to feed their children.”¹ -Dr. Martin Luther King

“Why don't you see it? Why don't you feel it? I don't know! I don't know!
You don't have to live next to me. Just give me my equality.
Everybody knows about Mississippi. Everybody knows about Alabama.
Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddamn!”² -Nina Simone

During the mid-to-late 1960s Martin Luther King, Jr. visited the small Delta town of Marks, Mississippi on two occasions, both of which moved him to tears and prompted him to intensify his commitment to combating poverty. In 1966, King visited a local Head Start daycare and witnessed a teacher quarter an apple to feed four hungry students, prompting him to intensify his efforts to combat both poverty and racism. His second trip to Marks ensured that this little Delta town would be the local focal point for his grandest national campaign. In the midst of organizing for the PPC, Rev. James Lawson called on King to join the Memphis Sanitation Workers' strike, which began in full force on February 12. While his advisers saw the Memphis campaign as a diversion and warned King not to get involved, he arrived in Memphis on March 18 and delivered a speech to over 15,000, connecting the strike to the national anti-poverty movement. The following day he began touring the Mississippi Delta. King wanted to witness first-hand the

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Conversation with Martin Luther King," *Conservative Judaism* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 17.

² Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddamn!" (Sam Fox Publishing/ASCAP, 1963).

deprivation and hunger that U.S. citizens faced in the poorest county in the nation. In an address given January 16, 2005 in celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Interim Chancellor Richard Herman of the University of Illinois Urbana/Champagne recounted the story of King's second visit to Marks:

In 1968, just before his death, Martin Luther King visited the black Cotton Street neighborhood in the country town of Marks, Mississippi, where the poorest of the poor lived in shotgun shacks that, every year, were inundated by floodwaters. At the end of Sims Street, he saw a house that seemed to be floating in a giant lake. Dr. King insisted on visiting the family in that house, and he did so by small boat. The symbolism of this—this island of searing poverty existing in an American sea of plenty—was too much even for a prophet to endure. In that flooded home, in Marks, Mississippi, in a lake at the end of Sims Street, Dr. King broke down and cried. From that day on, the people of the Cotton Street neighborhood have called that shack “the house where Martin wept.”³

After this encounter King decided the SCLC should commence the PPC in Marks with a rally to expose the extreme conditions in the poorest county in the poorest state in the nation.

Historians often repeat the stories of King's visits to Marks to signify his transformation into a poverty warrior, while Marks residents share their stories of King's visits to their homes as badges of honor. As King traveled the nation in the remaining weeks of his life, he used the story of his recent experience in Marks as a rallying point for the PPC. In a moving sermon, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,”

³ “A Call to Conscience, A Call to Action” Address by Interim Chancellor Richard Herman to the annual campus-community shared celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day January 16, 2005; accessed at <http://www.oc.uiuc.edu/speeches/mlk2005.html> (accessed February 12, 2007). See also Samuel McCray, Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 1, 2006. McCray confirms the story about King's visit to Cotton St.: “He was invited over, and he came back to Marks and went down to Cotton St. It was raining cats and dogs . . . They literally had to get on a boat to get him from the street to the house. And he walks into the house, and he literally breaks down. According to his aide, they had never seen him do that before . . . he visited a family, a man, his wife, and his children. He'd go through the house and there was

delivered at the National Cathedral in Washington on March 31, King testified to the congregation that when he asked Marks residents to describe how they survived, one responded: "we go around to the neighbors and ask them for a little something. When the berry season comes, we pick berries. When the rabbit season comes, we hunt and catch a few rabbits. And that's about it."⁴ Along with providing testimony from the local poor, King used his own emotional transformation in the Delta as a model for others. Yet the civil rights leader and poverty warrior knew that convincing the nation to enact a radical redistribution of wealth would require more than stories of one town's hard times.

CONNECTING THE LOCAL AND THE NATIONAL

In order to rally the nation's support for the PPC organizers had to use moving examples of the *local experience* of poverty to get them personally involved, while emphasizing the *national scope* of poverty to justify the protest in Washington. While many journalists and politicians recommended that government officials travel to the pockets of poverty throughout the nation, King insisted that poor people caravan to the seat of government so they could be seen and heard. The Mule Train, along with the other regional caravans, was the key to connecting the local experience of poor people with the national anti-poverty movement. Marks and the Quitman County area would remain a focal point as home of the Mule Train, but it would take local events to rally the town and inspire countless Marks resident to join the PPC.

basically just a bed and a mattress. He worked on a plantation. It was just appalling to him that someone could work every day and not even have enough for your family."

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" (Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on 31 March 1968. Congressional Record, 9 April 1968.)

Chapter six examines the local movement in Marks, Mississippi that emerged from local organizing for the PPC and explores how Marks' designation as the launching pad for both the movement as a whole and the ninth of the regional caravans the Mule Train—a caravan of around fifteen mule-drawn covered wagons—affected the poorest county in the nation. The caravans enabled SCLC to build a movement simultaneously at the local, regional, and national levels. Caravanning to the capital as a moving political theater, the Mule Train enabled participants to perform the limits on poor people's mobility—both economic and physical.

Enduring the long and arduous journey demonstrated the participants' determination and courage and challenged images of the poor as shiftless and deviant as they embraced mobility as a form of resistance. Participants enjoyed the freedom and opportunity the Washington-bound caravan provided, but they suffered through a slow and tedious trip using an outdated form of travel to symbolize their lack of physical and economic mobility. Many participants were still trapped in the same sharecropping system that generations of blacks before them had endured, and the Mule Train represented that system, while providing poor people with a temporary escape from it.

Drawing on interviews with participants of the Poor People's Campaign and other accounts of the Mule Train's journey to Washington, D.C., this analysis of the local movement in Marks and the Mule Train considers the ways in which race, gender, place, and poverty converged in the participants' experiences and in representations of a movement literally on the move. The Mule Train communicated the experience of rural southern poverty to the local communities across their path and to the nation through national press coverage. As Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard—editors of the

seminal *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*—argue that an essential component of the politicizing process for most people includes “moving from seeing issues as personal, or even as local problems, to viewing them as systemic and national.”⁵The PPC enabled local people to place their individual or communal problems in a national context and demonstrate the connection between their local problems and the nation’s economic system and racial order.

This chapter embraces the goals and methods of revisionist scholars who have looked at the role of local people and the significance of grassroots movements for our understanding of the national civil rights movement. This study of the organizing efforts of local people in Marks, Mississippi, builds on the existing literature by considering the connections between the local and the national through an analysis of the effects of the Mule Train journey on the participants, as well as how representations of the Mule Train affected perceptions of poverty nationally and people’s experiences locally.

MARKS AND THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

The Mississippi Delta stretches south from Memphis, Tennessee to Vicksburg, Mississippi, nestled between the Yazoo River to the east and the mighty Mississippi to the west. Delta scholar Kim Lacy Rogers explains that centuries of floods produced an agricultural gold mine known as the Black Belt where locals rumored that the topsoil could run eighteen feet deep. In order to farm the land, local people constructed an

⁵ See Theoharis and Woodard, *Groundwork*, 7. Theoharis and Woodard recognize the role national leaders played in this transformation: “The organizing and solidarity work of celebrities, national leaders, and international figures underscored for many local people that the world was indeed watching, that what happened in their town or city did matter, that they were part of a broader struggle against racial injustice.”

elaborate system of levees to exploit the rich soil for planters' favored crop—cotton. The area boasted some of the largest plantations in the nation, and many enslaved blacks feared being sent to the Delta to labor. While slavery was declared over with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, sharecropping and tenant farming quickly took its place, transforming the recently freedmen and women of the Delta into virtual slaves.

In exchange for their labor, black (and to a lesser degree white) tenants and sharecroppers received housing, supplies, and a share of the crop's revenues—typically from a half to a third.⁶ Exclusion from the financial management left laborers at the mercy of the landowners who were notorious for making unscrupulous calculations, and most struggled just to break even no matter how hard they worked. The poverty that existed in the Mississippi Delta was not the product of lazy and apathetic blacks trapped in a cyclical culture of poverty, but rather the result of a system that exploited black labor and promoted indebtedness. Saidiya V. Hartman argues that the “contradictory aspects of liberty of contract and the reliance on coercion in stimulating free labor” became inescapable once white southerners enacted Black Codes and other forms of labor compulsion after the Civil War as part of what Hartman calls “the lessons of emancipation employed against the poor.”⁷ The strife and struggle of free blacks and the descent back into virtual slavery was due largely to the failure of Sherman's Field Order #15 which had promised the freed blacks “forty acres and a mule” to start a new life.

⁶ Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

Thus, rural southern blacks, and many poor whites, produced the region's staple crops—cotton, rice, and sugarcane—as sharecroppers and tenant farmers for the same planter families who used to own them or their predecessors as slaves. As Marks native Samuel McCray explains, sharecropping, which persisted into the late 1960s and beyond, was a system of total control over the daily lives and political expressions of southern blacks:

“You have to understand the whole system. It was like slavery. I lived on a plantation at the time. People who actually lived on a plantation didn't have control over their own lives. They gave you a donated house, but if you stepped outside the realm, then you had no place to live . . . There were only certain places for you to purchase food. If you didn't credit your food over the six months until you started to work then you couldn't feed your family, except out of a garden. They could evict you, and you were at the mercy of the elements and there was nowhere you could go.”⁸

The almost total dependence of the tenant on the owner also greatly circumscribed local blacks' ability to act politically in their best interests. In his thirtieth anniversary retrospective *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* renowned Washington-based photographer Roland Freeman recounts hearing women gathered in his grandmother's kitchen talk about “hard times Mississippi.” Explaining his fear as he entered the Delta to photograph the Mule Train, Freeman reflected on being told “that of all the southern states things were worst in Mississippi; they were so bad that they dared not go back, even for funerals.”⁹ The PPC brought national attention, leadership, and resources to the Delta and provided poor people an opportunity to challenge the plantation system.

⁷ Saidiya V. Hartman, “Fashioning Obligation: Indebted Servitude and the Fetters of Slavery” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138.

⁸ Samuel McCray Interview.

SCLC's decision to make Marks a focal point of the PPC was based not only on the town holding a special place for Dr. King, but also because it was the hub of Quitman County, which had the notorious title of the poorest county in the nation. With almost 2,500 residents in 1968, Marks was what Mule Train historian and Marks native Hilliard Lackey describes as "the queen city in a county of 21,000 that boasts of towns and villages such as Sledge, Darling, Lambert, Crenshaw, Falcon, and Vance, with populations of less than 500 each."¹⁰ For a surrounding area full of small, unincorporated towns and plantations, Marks was the center of activity. When I interviewed Marks native Booker Wright, Jr., he reminisced about weekends in Marks as a young man and how he and his friends enjoyed going to the movies or hanging out at local restaurants. But despite its "queen city" status, Marks was still located in the poorest county in the nation.

While blacks enjoyed weekends in Marks, the planter families traveled to nearby Clarksdale or made the hour-long drive to Memphis for their entertainment. The combination of economic status and white privilege enabled local whites the freedom of mobility, while constraining the economic, social, and physical mobility of Delta blacks. Local white establishments—the Moose Lodge, the Elks, and the VFW—were all "members only." Marks native and historian Hilliard Lackey explains that the two races were almost totally socially segregated: "Never did blacks invade white social life at any level. Occasionally, whites wandered into a black juke joint or church to the utter amazement and bemusement of blacks . . . they were drunk, dazed, crazy or had an urgent

⁹ Roland Freeman, *The Mule Train, A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 4.

message.” The one exception was on Sunday afternoons after church when young black and white boys occasionally engaged in a highly competitive game of baseball and the annual July 4th game, which Lackey declares was “an ingenious get-together initiated by state legislator and plantation heir, O.L. Garmon Jr., who donated beef, beer, and sodas for the occasion.” While blacks and whites got along on the baseball field, the two races remained physically separated at almost all other times.¹¹

A set of railroad tracks physically separated blacks from whites in the small towns of Quitman County. While race continued to trump class in terms of social status, a greater visual contrast existed between the haves and the have-nots in Marks than between white and black when it came to housing. Most blacks and some poor whites lived in shotgun houses with outdoor facilities, while the majority of whites lived in small houses with indoor fixtures. All of the homes I saw in Marks in 2006 were rather modest, but if you leave the town and head west along Highway 6, you suddenly see massive green lawns with driveways that stretch almost a half-mile back from the road leading to immense white Victorian houses.¹² These few wealthy white families have dominated the region, both economically and politically, for generations, ensuring that the poor—both black and white—would remain in a perpetual cycle of poverty.

While the majority of whites in Marks suffered economic hardship, they traded economic mobility for both political power and racial status. Despite the fact that blacks

¹¹ Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train* (Jackson, MS: Town Square Books, Inc., 1998), 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5. Lackey explains that these “four-to-six bedroom white-columned plantation homes,” which were “accessible by a half-mile long driveway” generally had “one or more accompanying ranch style house for on-the-premises hired help, married children, or guests.”

were in the majority in Quitman County, with the 1960 U.S. Census reporting approximately 13,000 blacks to 7,000 whites, the small minority of wealthy plantation owners dominated the power structure in the Delta with support from working-class and poor whites. Marks native Samuel McCray explains that in “‘68 they were giving literacy tests in this county” and that voting officials discovered that people “were actually voting in higher numbers than the population, recently.”¹³ Few blacks voted during this time period, despite their greater numbers and the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.¹⁴ Intimidation from plantation owners and local authorities prevented many from voting, while white officials went to great lengths to prevent those who attempted to vote from doing so successfully.

In addition to formal political disenfranchisement, local whites suppressed any protest activity among blacks. Mule Train participant Lee Dora Collins explained the risks protesting in the Delta: “you had to sneak around and have your meetings in secret . . . They would lock you up, beat you, or even something worse. It was really dangerous being involved in the civil rights business.”¹⁵ Cora Diggs, a secretary for the local NAACP during the 1950s, recounts how she had to hide the list of NAACP members and had white men forcibly enter her home in search for the list.¹⁶ The political intimidation persisted on through the late 1960s and still exists to some extent today.

Intimidation and abuse were not only directed at activists, but also at unsuspecting citizens. Lackey explains that the sheriff, who was also the tax collector, tormented

¹³ Samuel McCray Interview.

¹⁴ Lackey, 16.

¹⁵ Dora Lee Collins Interviewed by Roland Freeman cited in Freeman, 116.

¹⁶ Cora Lee Diggs Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006.

young black men, reportedly “pulling their facial hairs out with pliers” or humiliated them by making them “blow air into any condoms found in their wallets.” The sheriff attempted to control every arena of young blacks’ lives in Marks. He forbid women from wearing trousers and snipped the ties of young black men, eliminating these young blacks’ freedom of expression. Local officials even tried to control the romantic life of young blacks, forbidding black boys from carrying pictures of girls in their wallets. Local law enforcement also attempted to control black adults, regularly raiding juke joints and beating and arresting any who resisted such invasions. The white power structure went to great lengths to intimidate local blacks, secure their power, and prevent unity in the black community. Lackey reports that the local sheriff “kept a bruising hulk of a young black incarcerated, and the youth’s parole was won by making life miserable for any other cell mates who happened to be placed into that cell.”¹⁷

While the appointment of the first black policeman in Marks would seem to be a great achievement for a segregated community, many in the black community opposed the appointment. When J.L. Pride became the first black policeman on Marks’ three-man force, a 68-year-old woman asked, “how could the man betray his own people that way?”¹⁸ Bertha Burres Johnson explains that having a black man on the police force was no different than the sheriff using a black inmate: “They would have the black officers in the black area. Told them, as if to say, ‘don’t hold back the stick, if you need it, use it.’ And sometimes they would use it unnecessarily.”¹⁹ Black power would not necessarily

¹⁷ Lackey, 15.

¹⁸ Robert Maynard, “The 20th Century Tests Marks, Mississippi” *Washington Post*, May 5, 1968.

¹⁹ Bertha Burres Johnson Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006.

result from black individuals being placed in power positions. It would take the combination of national organizing, local protest, and a traveling performance of Mississippi poverty to shake this Delta community loose from white political domination, economic exploitation, and physical intimidation.

“THE POOREST COUNTY IN THE NATION”

On February 12, 1968, SCLC activist R.B. Cottonreader wrote to Hosea Williams detailing his journey through the Mississippi Delta to rally support for the PPC and his research on which counties needed the most assistance. Cottonreader reported:

Quitman County’s black people are among the poorest if not the poorest in Mississippi, and said that they would support the Poor People’s Campaign to Washington in any way that they can, but they further stated that they felt that financial support within the county would be very limited, as lots of the black people in Quitman County are near starvation and out of work and the ones working are underpaid. Mr. Franklin told me of four families that had been recently put off the white man’s plantation.

He explained that there was an office and a hall for meetings that were available but that another family was living there after being thrown off a plantation. Cottonreader invited local leaders to a statewide meeting with Dr. King three days later in Edwards, Mississippi,²⁰ and on February 19, SCLC held its first mass meeting in Marks.

Leon Hall, SCLC’s local representative, reported that the major issues local people wanted addressed included unemployment and underemployment, specifically regarding what locals identified as the “rigid segregation in hiring policies” and the “lack of training programs for the skilled labor market, segregation in the trade unions.”

SCLC’s leadership recognized these needs and used the opportunity to inform the people

about the benefits of one of the PPC's central demands—a guaranteed job or annual income. Other complaints reflected the communal effects of wealth being concentrated in the hands of a few and a labor system based on exploitation and indebtedness. The absence of available housing and the resulting substandard, overcrowded housing conditions, as well as the problem of eviction from plantations were high on their list of complaints. Hall reported that, “Rents are often absurdly high in contrast to the usually shabby condition of the property. This is especially true when the ability of poor people to pay (based upon their income) is considered.” Education was also an area of concern since schools remained segregated, overcrowded, and even lacked what the report deemed “basic essentials such as proper sewage, ventilation, lighting conditions, etc., to the point of being unhealthy conditions for children to learn in.” In addition to dilapidated conditions, residents complained about the lack of athletic and recreation facilities and new and up-to-date textbooks.²¹

Some problems reflected failures at both the local and federal levels. Insufficient welfare was a major problem, with reports of entire families receiving only fifty dollars a month and individuals receiving as low as nine or ten dollars a month. Local residents complained that federal programs were not reaching those most in need. Marks resident Irene Collins recounts the limits of the welfare program in 1968:

“During that time you had to buy your food stamps . . . You paid so much for your food stamp and got so many, but they wasn't free then like they is now . . . They provide for some, but if you look at, there is some they are providing for that don't really need it, and the needy is going without.”²²

²⁰ Letter from Cottonreader to Williams, February 12, 1968, KL, SCLC, 178:9.

²¹ From Leon Hall, SCLC Project Director, Grenada, Miss. To Hosea Williams, Field Director, February 21, 1968, KL, SCLC, 178:9.

²² Irene Collins Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 1, 2006.

Data garnered from participants' registration forms and SCLC questionnaires demonstrated that the vast majority of poor people in the area had literally no income and were receiving virtually no social services or federal aid.²³

While many of the complaints described the need for improved social services and economic opportunity, some of the demands were more radical and emphasized black power advocates' calls for self-determination. Leon Hall explained that one of the local people's main concerns was local control and administration of federal social programs:

“One of the main questions was how to insure that these jobs and money are given in proportion to the Black population. In regard to this, most Black people want a voice in running these programs at the ‘grass roots’ level, i.e., they want to have sincere, qualified people from their own ranks who understand their problems, to participate in the administration of the programs, and the decision-making.”

Others expressed more nationalist sentiments, calling for “the possibility of making a demand for reparations as a part of the program” and “the possibility of having petitions for land grants to establish economic bases for Black people to work from.” Farm cooperatives were another popular path toward self-determination and away from economic dependence on whites.²⁴

²³ Participants were asked to indicate whether they received any social security benefits, welfare checks, or food stamps. The responses were staggering. Among approximately 140 questionnaires, only twenty participants reported that they were receiving any form of Social Security, while 117 indicated they received none. Twenty-five people replied that they received welfare, with six receiving ADC benefits, but 104 of the respondents indicated that they received absolutely no relief. Even the new Food Stamps program only reached forty-two participants, while eighty-six others reported that they could not afford the two dollars required to purchase the stamps and were reliant instead on the insufficient surplus commodities program, which was not even available in some of the poorest counties in the nation. KL, SCLC, 181:4, 5, 6, 7.

²⁴ Leon Hall, SCLC Project Director, Grenada, Miss. To Hosea Williams, Field Director, February 21, 1968; KL, SCLC, 178:9

SCLC moved into the little Delta town in the spring of 1968 and began organizing the local community. Local women like Bertha Burres Johnson played a key role in helping SCLC get Marks excited about the PPC. She was twenty-eight years old at the time and had six children between the ages of three and nine and was in the process of getting a divorce when she got a job with SCLC. Moving from her husband's apartment in Chicago back home to Marks made her recognize the limits of moving North to escape racism and poverty: "Lots of Mississippi folks were in Chicago, but most of them were just as poor as me . . . I decided to come back home to Marks; it was even worse back there, but at least I was around family." While her family welcomed her home, Johnson explains that when she tried to get on welfare, the local administrator told her to "go back to Chicago."²⁵ With help from a local minister, Reverend Ingram, she began to do secretarial work for the NAACP and the Voter's League and met SCLC staff such as R.B. Cotton Reader and Eugene Marsette. She became a secretary for SCLC when they began organizing in town and received three or four dollars for taking notes at the meeting, which Johnson reports was "enough for me to pay my water bill or my light bill." SCLC set up an office in a little three-room shotgun house. Johnson emphasizes that in the beginning, SCLC "didn't have any confidence in anyone helping them because so far no one was helping. The only help we got was the help each organization was trying to do."²⁶ The presence of civil rights' nationally renowned hero, Martin Luther King, Jr., and his death helped inspire Marks residents to join the PPC, but it was a local event that rallied the entire town's support.

²⁵ Bertha Burres Johnson Interviewed by Roland Freeman, cited in Freeman, 113.

²⁶ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

THE HIGH SCHOOL PROTEST: LOCAL EVENTS, NATIONAL NEWS

In 1960, the three black high schools in the area consolidated to establish Quitman County Industrial High School. Black youth from across the county became one community, and the poor conditions and lack of resources at the high school made the possibility of a united front among students and teachers all the more likely. As was true for countless civil rights campaigns, young people would serve as the vanguard of the local movement in Marks. In late April of 1968, SCLC organizer Willie Bolden arrived in Marks, Mississippi to organize the town for the PPC along with Andrew Marsette, Jimmie L Wells, and Margie Hyatt—all in their twenties.²⁷ On the morning of May 1, 1968, Bolden and his staff went to the Quitman County Industrial High School and rallied a crowd of several hundred students to popularize the PPC and sign-up participants for the Mule Train. The principal called on the sheriff, who promptly arrested Bolden for disturbing the peace and trespassing on school property. Samuel McCray, a senior in 1968, explains the students' response to what was considered an extreme reaction to Bolden's presence: "We felt the high school was our turf. And under normal circumstances, he would have been able to speak. The seniors refused to march." The senior class was rehearsing for their graduation ceremony when they discovered local police had arrested Bolden. Within minutes of his arrest, approximately three hundred students and several teachers enacted a spontaneous walkout, marching to the county jail to protest Bolden's arrest.²⁸

²⁷ Lackey, 27, 21-22.

²⁸ Samuel McCray Interview.

While the students were ready to go to jail for protesting, they were unprepared for the confrontation with police that took place outside the jail. McCray explains the surprise nature of the attack:

They waited to they were right up on us . . . We were crunched over laying down waiting for some tear gas and ready to ride that out. So we really weren't prepared for the Billy clubs; I certainly wasn't. They came over, and literally started beating people, literally just walking right through. And I think that was the only time they stepped out of formation, they just kind of . . . beating everybody that would get in the way.²⁹

The sudden violent assault against non-violent protesters left the town stunned and many protesters injured. One teacher, Lydia McKinnon, suffered severe blows, which photographer Roland Freeman documents his collection, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*. In an interview with Freeman, McKinnon recounts her amazement at her own courage to protest:

White folks had the best of everything, and what we blacks were getting was worse than second best, and we were expected to do a good job with hardly anything. So, for that one crazy moment, I stood up for what I knew to be right, and with the butts of their guns and the heels of their boots, they knocked me unconscious for it.³⁰

SCLC leaders quickly responded to the violent reaction to the protest and sought to build on the passion displayed in Marks.

That same evening, Abernathy held a mass meeting at the Eudora AME Zion Church and rallied a smaller group who marched to the jail and held a lengthy prayer service and singing session while law enforcement officials peacefully stood guard.

While the protest appeared on its surface to be non-violent, a local man, Ned

²⁹ Samuel McCray Interview.

³⁰ Freeman, 100.

Gaithwright, recounted years later that many of the marchers were “armed to the teeth,” hiding weapons beneath their coats,³¹ demonstrating the faulty binaries that have been constructed between non-violence and self-defense. The following day, May 2, hundreds of protesters marched from the Lorraine Motel in Memphis to Hernando after a ceremony placing a plaque in honor of Dr. King outside the hotel where he was assassinated. From there the marchers boarded buses and traveled sixty miles south to Marks to initiate the first stage of the Poor People’s Campaign.

Chicago reporter Abraham Rice recounted the experience of traveling from Memphis to Marks in an article titled “Marks, Miss.—Still Confederate.” He expressed his shock when he encountered the poverty and racism of the Mississippi Delta:

As a black man seeing the town for the first time, just by walking through the black ghetto you can’t help but feel as though time has stood still because you can still see the old dirt roads and black children playing on the roadways ducking the gigantic clouds of dust created by the occasional cars as they passed by . . . As you leave the black community and head toward the well kept grounds of the city courthouse, you can well expect some white hillbilly to yell out, “Hey coon, you on the wrong side o’ town , black boy.”³²

Unlike Rice, many Memphis participants had been to Marks or had heard of its reputation for “daylight segregation and midnight integration.” He explains that the fear of the unknown awaiting them brought the pilgrims together: “There was fear on board that bus and there was unity among black people the likes of which have never been seen before.” As the group approached the Mississippi border, Marks police pulled the bus over and claimed it didn’t have a right to enter the town because it lacked a city sticker or Mississippi plates. After Abernathy quickly responded that the group would walk the

³¹ Lackey, 41.

³² Abraham Rice, “Marks, Miss.—Still Confederate,” *West Side Torch*, May 10-24, 1968.

remaining thirty-five miles into town, the officers allowed the bus to proceed, explaining that they would make an exception for the group. After arriving in Marks and seeing that the mayor had failed to provide electricity and toilets for the marchers, he threatened that participants would have to relieve themselves “on the courthouse lawn, and I’m afraid there will be some mighty green grass here when we leave.”³³ Abernathy’s threats, the swelled number of activists in town, and the presence of the national media eventually forced local officials to accommodate the PPC.

With additional protesters on hand, Reverend Abernathy led a third march to the courthouse with between 1,000 and 3,000 marchers, locked in arms and singing triumphantly. With a stronger coalition present, law enforcement stood peacefully on guard as the larger group of more experienced protesters was able to inhabit the space of the courthouse lawn with an authority that the smaller group of teachers and students lacked. In response to the violence at the courthouse, black families kept their children out of local schools for days, enacting an improvised boycott to protest the violent attack against their children.³⁴ The spontaneous walkout, the melee at the courthouse, and the peaceful demonstrations that followed ignited this small Delta town and transformed the PPC into both a local and national movement.

Local residents comment on how these events not only sparked mass local participation in the Mule Train and PPC, but also prompted the white power structure to begin to respond to local needs. Local organizer Bertha Bures Johnson claims that the incident at the school is what really got people interested in going on the Mule Train:

³³ Abraham Rice, “Marks, Miss.—Still Confederate,” *West Side Torch*, May 10-24, 1968.

³⁴ Lackey, 49, 53.

“They were upset then, so you got a lot more people to go then.”³⁵ Doris Shaw Baker explains that the walkout at the local high school invigorated the community because it “exposed the poverty, racism, hidden injustices” that plagued Marks.³⁶ Samuel McCray concurs that the high school protest was the key event in mobilizing Marks:

The incident at the high school probably inspired more folks to get involved than anything else. You had people here that were working here all the time, people engaged in the whole civil rights movement and all that. But the galvanizing force was the fact that you had people who would invade a school and attack children for no other reason than that people don’t want to live in poverty anymore, and I think that was at the core.³⁷

The series of events, originally prompted by the local officials’ overreaction to an “outside agitator,” caused Marks residents to join the movement in large numbers, but it would take national attention to the local situation in Marks to force local officials to work with the PPC.

The high school protest quickly garnered the attention of the national press who swooped into Marks and gave it the exposure it desperately needed. A *Washington Post* article titled “The 20th Century Tests Marks, Mississippi,” reported on the recent local events, declaring that they had already caused a “minor revolution affecting the Negro community to its very core.” One local resident interviewed described the stark physical segregation and economic exploitation that Marks’ black community suffered: “Those people there across them tracks—they use a Negro for what they want, but they don’t respect him, and here on this side, the Negroes done decided that they ain’t gonna take it

³⁵ Bertha Burres Johnson Interviewed by Roland Freeman, May 14, 1968, cited in Freeman, 114.

³⁶ Doris Shaw Baker Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006.

³⁷ Samuel McCray Interview.

no more.”³⁸ This defiant attitude became widespread and prompted many who had earlier dismissed the campaign to now register to go to Washington.

The presence of the national media convinced local people that joining the national anti-poverty campaign might give them the exposure they needed to force local officials to meet their basic needs. The *New York Times* carried daily accounts of the events transpiring in Marks, and a *Newsweek* article reported that, the publicity of the violent encounter had prompted city officials to appease both the activists and the press:

Horried at thus being held up as a horrible example, the local white-power elite offered electricity, water and chemical toilets for the marchers’ campsite and an office with free Cokes for the press—a show of hospitality aimed mainly at speeding the pilgrims on their way.³⁹

Local officials became more accommodating once the press placed the national spotlight on Marks, but it would take the sacrifice of local blacks traveling to Washington and protesting the lack of both federal and local resources to transform this small town and its residents.

TENT CITY

As the press, activists, and curious spectators swooped into this small Delta town, the visitors—as well as local black activists who had lost their homes on plantations after joining the campaign—needed somewhere to sleep. Following the groundwork laid by the voting rights movement in Lowndes County, Alabama and the model of Resurrection City, the campaign leadership in Marks decided to erect a Tent City in a forty-four acre industrial park south of the town. In addition to serving as sleeping quarters for participants and visitors, the Tent City was the site of mass meetings and freedom

³⁸ Robert Maynard, “The 20th Century Tests Marks, Mississippi,” *Washington Post*, May 5, 1968.

rallies.⁴⁰ The national media coverage had an immediate impact on the local movement. A *New York Times* article reported that the town's white mayor accommodated the PPC allowing them to use the space for their Tent city but also, providing installation of water lines, lights, and outhouses. In addition to providing accommodations for these "outsiders" Mayor Howard C. Langford's public endorsement of the PPC's "'goals but not the methods'" infuriated local whites who had called for a curfew on the activists.⁴¹

While local whites protested the activities going on at Tent City, it was a place of refuge for many local blacks who had lost their homes as a result of participating in the protests. Plantation owners sought violent retaliation on workers for any participation in the PPC. Roland Freeman reports that after one planter found out SCLC staff had visited one of his female workers he returned to her house the following day, "shotgun in his hand, kicked open her door, and scared her kids half to death. By the time the SCLC field-workers got there, he had thrown out all this woman's belongings—which consisted of a couple of spreads tied with rags."⁴² Tent City provided lodging, safety, and other resources for those brave enough to risk joining the campaign, just as Resurrection City would do once they reached Washington.

The increased attention Marks received also translated into more donations for the campaign. A Chicago-based group donated the tents, as well as food and blankets. When interviewed by Hilliard Lackey, Marks resident James Taper reflected on his gratitude for the plentiful food at Tent City and the generosity of people contributing to the cause in

³⁹ "We're on Our Way," *Newsweek*, May 6, 1968, 30-32.

⁴⁰ Freeman, 96.

⁴¹ Walter Rugaber, "Mississippi Mayor Backs Goals of March of Poor," *New York Times*, May 4, 1968.

Marks. He recounts seeing Jesse Jackson receive a check from radio legend Dick Clark for what Taper deemed ““the largest amount of money I had ever seen. It had a lot of zeroes.”” Even some local whites donated money and resources to the group staying in Tent City.⁴³ The space provided a temporary refuge for the participants and the outsiders observing this local movement as it prepared for its long and arduous journey to join the national campaign.

MARKS, MULES, & THE MAKINGS OF THE MULE TRAIN

Enthusiasm for the Mule Train and the PPC was at an all time high, but a series of setbacks and rain delays postponed their departure. As the Mule Train participants prepared for their journey and waited for the rain to pass, they had time to reflect on why they joined the PPC and what they expected from their participation. Photographer Roland Freeman interviewed two middle-class volunteers from Huntsville, Alabama—a white woman, Myrna Copeland and a black woman, Joan Cashin—and asked whether or not the participants really understood the campaign’s goals and meaning. They both agreed that they did. Copeland explains,

“What we as middle-class Americans might think is ignorance on the part of the black people in the Deep South that are taking part in this campaign, might actually be our sense that they are rather ignorant about the philosophy behind the movement. But when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of what this campaign is all about, they know more than we do because they’ve lived through the destitution and the poverty that has caused a movement like this, and when they’re put up against the wall, they can tell you why they are going to Washington and can tell it in a much more sorrowful way than we could.”⁴⁴

⁴² Freeman, 122.

⁴³ Lackey, 57.

⁴⁴ Myrna Copeland, Interviewed by Roland Freeman, cited in Freeman, 123.

SCLC organizers shared Copeland's confidence in poor people's ability to describe and comprehend their situation.

In an attempt to record and preserve their thoughts and feelings about the PPC, SCLC had participants fill out questionnaires before leaving on the Mule Train. These questionnaires support Copeland and Cashin's confidence in the participants' understanding of what the PPC was all about. Fifty-five-year-old S.C. Rose Kendrick recognized the importance of caravanning to the nation's capital:

Washington is the center of government power and the national government have the money and we are ask for our support we want it right now. Poor People do not get decent job and decent school. They do not get decent health care do not get decent government and decent police. Poor People do not even get respect as human being . . . Congressmen, you have the job and you have the money. I want some of it so I can live too.⁴⁵

The questionnaires gave the participants an opportunity to voice their demands and explain why they were lacking jobs, housing, food, and other basic needs.

One of the primary organizers from Marks, Bertha Burres Johnson, a twenty-eight-year-old single mother of six, explained that she was going to D.C. to fight for employment and to protest discrimination in the workplace. She explained in her questionnaire, "I would like to be able to get a good paying job, so I can take care of my family. The factories won't hire too many black people. We can't get a chance to show our talent."⁴⁶ Racism severely limited both men and women's job opportunities, but single mothers like Burres Johnson faced a unique set of challenges. An SCLC brochure for the PPC with a cover depicting an older black man's wrinkled and worn hands next to a young set of black hands holding the reins to one of the mules on the Mule Train

⁴⁵ KL, SCLC, 180:20.

quoted a single mother from Marks who summed up the experience of many young mothers who joined the movement:

Quitman County is on starvation. I have five children. Don't have a job. Don't have a husband. I get sixty dollars out of the month from welfare and I have to pay my rent, buy food, buy clothes and buy fuel and I am just starving to death. And it's not me by myself. There is a lot of us like this. We have to pay rent for houses with no bath and put on our boots to wade out in back. We done worked all our lives and we are just starving to death. No home fit to live in. I stay up all night. The roaches all night. My children have to stay out half of the night. I'm holding the light over them to help them sleep. Now you know something needs to be done now—not a while—now.”⁴⁷

With nothing to lose, these young women saw the month-long journey and indefinite stay in unpredictable conditions in Resurrection City not as a major sacrifice, but as a unique opportunity to change their personal circumstances and meet their local community's needs.

While young mothers with children suffering from starvation and destitution were traveling to Washington to save their families, young single women unencumbered by children looked at the journey as a chance for travel and excitement. Twenty-one-year-old Marks native Genevista Williams writes, “My reason for going is I might can learn something I don't know and see something I haven't seen before and I think it would be fun to go . . . I haven't been there before . . . I hope as many of my friends can go as possible.”⁴⁸ Most of the people on board the Mule Train had never traveled out of the area, and for the children in particular, the trip was more like a joyride than a social

⁴⁶ KL, SCLC, 180:20.

⁴⁷ KL, SCLC, 179:19.

⁴⁸ KL, SCLC, 180:20.

movement.⁴⁹ For the young and old alike, the Mule Train became an exciting journey, but it was fundamentally a desperate attempt to improve the participants' economic status.

The question on many minds before embarking on their long journey was whether traveling to the nation's capital in a Mule Train and protesting on the National Mall would actually make a difference in the participants' lives. When Roland Freeman asked Myrna Copeland what she expected the participants to gain from the PPC, she responded:

“I don't know. I think it's probably a bad year to ask Congress to respond favorably to a movement like this. There are a number of congressmen, particularly liberals and moderates who are up for reelection this November, and putting them on the spot like this is going to be very difficult.”⁵⁰

Like many liberal whites and some moderate blacks, Copeland considered the bigger political picture rather than what was going to happen to the people in Marks, placing a higher premium on reelecting left-leaning politicians rather than disrupting the status quo. When Freeman asked Copeland to explain her participation in the PPC despite this view, she responded:

“I wish you hadn't asked me that! I think this is something that has to be done. Perhaps this can be looked on as an education for the people of America. I think a lot of Americans just don't realize, are ignorant of how many poor people live in the U.S. I know that a good many of the middle-class white Americans who worked in our poverty program didn't even realize that these people existed before they actually worked with them . . . I think that there are a lot of people in the U.S. that are in that same situation, and until we can actually show them the poor, the great numbers of poor people we have in America, they won't be motivated to do something to back Congress to do something in Washington.”⁵¹

While the goals of the PPC were many, the overall purpose of the movement was to do just as Copeland explained and display the poverty that existed in the United States as a

⁴⁹ See Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author and Augusta Denson Interview for more on children's experiences on the Mule Train and in D.C.

⁵⁰ Myrna Copeland Interview, cited in Freeman, 122.

first step in convincing the American people to demand that their legislators focus on eradicating poverty. The Mule Train would be a powerful tool, exposing the conditions the rural poor lived in all along their journey from Marks, Mississippi to Washington, D.C.

The idea to have a mule-drawn train of covered wagons was one of King's original visions for the PPC and one that his successors would go to great lengths to ensure became a reality. But the process of locating mules and adapting nineteenth-century travel to twentieth-century conditions would not be an easy one. A Department of Agriculture spokesman reported that the U.S. mule population had dropped from 5,131,000 mules in 1931 to just 2,333,000 in 1950. With the rapid mechanization of the agricultural industry during the mid-twentieth-century, the Department had ceased to keep count after 1950 and suggested that most of the remaining mules were kept primarily for nostalgia. SCLC leaders consciously used mules not only for symbolic purposes but for practical ones as well, since they could handle conditions that would be impossible for horses to endure and were much less excitable.⁵²

Members of the Huntsville, Alabama SCLC affiliate, the Community Service Committee, played a fundamental role in getting the Mule Train on its way. John Cashin explains that he and Dr. Randolph Blackwell had discussed the possibility of having a mule train back in 1962 when they used a mule for their local voter registration campaign:

“Our mule carried a sign, ‘I can’t vote because I’m a mule—what’s your excuse?’ It was a very effective ploy, and we thought about someday using a mule train on

⁵¹ Myrna Copeland Interview, cited in Freeman, 122.

⁵² “A Long Road for the Vanishing Mule,” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 27, 1968, 8.

national TV to call attention to the ‘forty acres and a mule’ that we didn’t get during Reconstruction!”⁵³

In December of 1967, Cashin submitted a charter and by-laws for a new independent political party, the National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA). The men contemplated using the mule again to encourage voter participation among the semi-literate in the wake the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, explaining that “Even a mule can mark an ‘X’” almost became their slogan.⁵⁴

The Cashins volunteered to locate the mules and wagons that made the Mule Train possible. Joan Cashin confesses that the process was not an easy one. Sellers jacked up their prices once they knew they were in need of many mules, and someone informed the FBI that John Cashin was “trying to corner the market on mules.” Most of the mules had to be transported from as far away as Kentucky and Arkansas. The wagons were also problematic and had to be disassembled and reassembled for transport. Some were missing the flatbeds and seats, which participants had to make before they could embark on their journey. When Roland Freeman asked why John Cashin went to such lengths to help the Mule Train, Joan Cashin explained that her husband, “saw from the progress that they were making that somebody would have to take some fast action to really get this Mule Train off the round, and that’s the way he operates. If he decides something has to be done, he goes gung-ho.”⁵⁵ While SCLC dictated the national movement’s goals and structure, it was often up to volunteers like the Cashins and local grassroots people to get the local PPC movements going.

⁵³ John Cashin, Prepared Statement, cited in Freeman, 123.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

While the Cashins seemed to enjoy their participation in the Mule Train, John Cashin explains in comments he prepared in 1997 for Roland Freeman that this experience also dissuaded them from working with SCLC in the future: “since Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams, Andy Young, and Joe Lowery never saw fit to reimburse me for the over \$27,000 I had expended on SCLC’s behalf, it taught us to be very wary of preachers and their promises!”⁵⁶ The Cashins’ experience with SCLC was not an uncommon one. SCLC was often criticized for exploiting local communities and local people for their own purposes. Expediency seems to have often been the organization’s priority rather than fulfilling promises, often leaving activists who worked with the organization with a bad taste in their mouths.

The Cashins also helped ensure that the wagons had covers and got a group of white, liberal, Alabama women, part of group known as the “dreck set”—a Yiddish word describing their avant-garde, integrated group—joined with Myrna Copeland to construct the wagon covers.⁵⁷ Joan Cashin reported that the volunteers, primarily white female professors at the University of Alabama and the Alabama A&M College in Huntsville sewed all of the covers in just two days using three or four sewing machines in Copeland’s home. When Roland Freeman asked Copeland if she and her family encountered problems as a result of their activism, she explained that they received threatening phone calls and were forced to remove their kindergartener from school because no one would carpool with them. Copeland explained that the family suffered less than others because they were economically secure since she worked in the anti-

⁵⁶ John Cashin, Prepared Statement, cited in Freeman, 125.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

poverty programs and her husband had a federal job.⁵⁸ With the assistance of the Cashins and the volunteers from the “dreck set,” the Mule Train participants finally had the tools they needed to make their journey.

CHRONICLING THE CARAVAN

On Sunday, May 12 PPC participants joined with Coretta Scott King and NWRO activists in Washington for a Mother’s Day march launching the national stage of the PPC. The following day, as Ralph Abernathy broke ground declaring the site on the National Mall as Resurrection City, the two lead mules, Bullet and Ada, steered the Mule Train along the first day of its journey. Approximately one hundred poor people and fifteen SCLC staff set off in seventeen mule-drawn covered wagons. The group included more than forty women and twenty children, with ages ranging from eight months to over seventy years old, with the majority being between seventeen and thirty years of age. SCLC gave each family a wagon to travel in, while large families sometimes received an additional wagon. Two cars and a truck accompanied the Mule Train providing portable toilets, food, and the participants belongings.

Inexperience with harnessing and shoeing mules and assembling covered wagons and multiple rain delays caused the caravan to leave about ten days later than scheduled. While most of the delays were due to a lack of preparation or inclement weather, Bolden charged a police officer with cutting the corral fence shortly before dawn, enabling approximately thirty mules to wander off, further postponing the mission.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Freeman, 119.

⁵⁹ “30 Mules in March Back After Fleeing Through Cut Fence,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1968.

SCLC set a tight schedule for the Mule Train, but the unremitting rain and the difficulty of mixing a mule train with twentieth-century traffic led to a longer journey than anticipated. Many attributed delays and complications to SCLC's general lack of organization. When Roland Freeman interviewed Myrna Copeland before the Mule Train's departure, she explained SCLC's attitude towards time and schedules:

“As Andy Young says, the Movement is a movement, and a movement shouldn't be forced or expected to meet deadlines. A movement of people is just an upsurge of their opinion and feelings. When you're working with the feelings of people, you can't be expected to meet deadlines and have everything go on schedule.”⁶⁰

While many criticized SCLC for its lackadaisical approach to time and order, those who had experience with the organization understood that this was simply the way this group functioned. Joan Cashin, who had worked with SCLC since 1962, declared:

“I think that observers who have not been involved in activity here in the South may think from what they see that it is totally unorganized, real chaos. But I think the SCLC is now better organized than any other national organization in the South, and it seems very typical to me to appear as though a lot of people don't seem to know what to do or what is going on or what would be next. It's a matter of working with what you have, and so whoever volunteers, you work with them. Usually, it is a small hard core of people . . . a few enthusiastic people to light the spark and get it moving. And as you begin to get things together, others will join.”⁶¹

A reporter for *Commonweal* agreed that SCLC's chaotic style was an asset to the PPC rather than a liability, insisting that while Washington bureaucrats and politicians felt uneasy about SCLC's “haphazard organization,” it was “precisely here, in its confusion and inefficiency, its generally hand-to-mouth character, that the Campaign will indirectly

⁶⁰ Myrna Copeland Interviewed by Roland Freeman, cited in Freeman, 120.

⁶¹ Joan Cashin, Interviewed by Roland Freeman, cited in Freeman, 120.

reveal to the rest of America the reality of being poor.”⁶² The Mule Train not only dramatized poor southern blacks and whites’ experience, it also displayed the determination of some to resist the cyclical poverty of the South and challenge stereotypes of the indolent and indifferent poor.

Despite claims for letting the movement move with the emotions of the people, SCLC and Mule Train leadership tried to keep as tight and as regimented a schedule as possible. Roland Freeman recounts how each night when the day’s journey came to an end, there was still much to do:

Food would be inventoried, distributed, and prepared; mules would be watered and fed; wagons and equipment would be inspected and repaired; passengers would access their personal belongings; children would play; and staff would organize rallies, prayer meetings, and community support. All in all, it was an awesome amount of daily logistics to attend to more than a hundred people and their travel across the South.”⁶³

As was true in most of the civil rights campaigns, men led the rallies while women worked tirelessly—morning, noon, and night—in the background, tending to all of the daily necessities of the movement.

Although few if any saw their names in the headlines, many women were leaders on the Mule Train. For instance, Margorie Hyatt assisted Bolden, keeping records of all of the feed and supplies needed for the mules. Faye Porche, SCLC’s financial administrator managed the caravan’s expenses, while Marks native Bertha Burres Johnson—with her six children in tow—kept track of the ever-fluctuating group of participants.⁶⁴ As one of the primary leaders of the Mule Train, Burres Johnson was

⁶² “See the Poor,” *Commonweal*, (May 31, 1968): 317-318.

⁶³ Freeman, 38-39, 57.

⁶⁴ Freeman, 126.

responsible for ensuring that participants had a place to sleep, something to eat, and medical care if needed. She kept track of Marks participants throughout the journey and once they arrived in Resurrection City. Traveling in mule-drawn wagons was simply too hard for some participants, so at each stop weary travelers were offered SCLC-funded bus tickets to return home or wherever they wanted to go next.⁶⁵

While some took the free bus ticket home SCLC offered at stops along the way, most participants were able to withstand the harsh conditions and make the entire journey to Washington. Riding in the Mule Train and coping with the incessant rain made Wagon Master Willie Bolden and other participants compare their experience to that of nineteenth-century western travelers:

“We used to just sit down late in the evening and talk about what life must have been like for the pioneers going out West and how they traveled in mule trains and similar situations. I mean, I know that for us it was raining and cold, and in almost every town that we went into, we didn’t sleep in hotels.”

Some Mule Train participants slept in their wagons or under the stars, but many stayed in the churches or homes of local people along their path. Bolden suggested that it was the spirit of unity among the Mule Train participants and the local people they encountered that kept them going on the arduous trip:

“I think that it was because of unity and commitment, and that we got folks to understand that this was not going to be an easy journey. It had never been done before. We didn’t know of anyone in our time that had undertaken such a task. We were going to have to stick together . . . I would solicit help from the local communities at these meetings. We were received well in almost every community we stopped in. They were poor folks just like us.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

⁶⁶ Willie Bolden Interviewed by Roland Freeman, cited in Freeman, 126.

Many of the Marks residents I interviewed recounted the generosity of people along their travels. Bertha Burres Johnson how kind and generous local people were: “The first family gave us a mattress to go on the bottom of the wagon . . . we got radios, TVs, cameras, any of those little appliances they didn’t want, they gave us food, they gave us toys for the children.”⁶⁷ Participants acquired not only food and lodging, but also clothes, books, and even money. PPC leaders hired a truck to travel back and forth between the Mule Train and Quitman County, delivering many of the items collected along the way.⁶⁸ In addition, Hosea Williams sent a Western Union telegram to the 15th Annual Conference on Marketing and Public Relations in the Negro Market asking for their help developing a “Poor People’s Store” in Marks based on the donations of non-perishable foods, furniture, farming equipment, school supplies, medical supplies, clothing, and shoes acquired along the journey.⁶⁹

Most of the people the Mule Train encountered were kind and charitable, but the caravan faced resistance from the very beginning. Historian Hilliard Lackey suggests that bomb threats plagued the Mule Train from before it was even assembled,⁷⁰ and the caravan had a number of confrontations with local police. Mule Train leader Andrew W. Marrsett was arrested for “obstructing a highway when he refused to move a car” on the first day of the journey but was quickly released after Bolden threatened to take the mule train to the jail and protest his. An SCLC spokesman explained later that Marrsett’s

⁶⁷ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ KL, SCLC, 177:2.

⁷⁰ Lackey, 95.

arrest was not about the car but resulted from an altercation with a police officer who had called him “Boy.”⁷¹

Throughout the journey, the Mule Train faced occasional resistance from law enforcement and local whites, but opposition was not the caravan’s only problem. They also had to cope with the forces of nature and the challenges of traveling in a mule train alongside busy highways. The caravan started out slow to appease both the mules and the nervous travelers making their first stop in nearby Batesville, just ten miles west of Marks. On their second day, the group headed down Highway 51 to Courtland, just five miles south of Batesville, and arrived the following day, May 16, in Grenada, Mississippi, where they lost one horse and had to repair several wagons.

As the Mule Train made its way across Mississippi, it continued to receive mixed reviews from local people and officials. James Taper recalled that bullets fired from a passing car scared the group but hurt none.⁷² The group stayed in Grenada, an SCLC base since 1966, for four days before making their way on through Duck Hill, Winona, and Kilmichael, Mississippi between May 20 and May 22. The following day the Mule Train experienced another run-in with law enforcement when local sheriff deputies stopped the caravan about a mile east of Europa, Mississippi.⁷³ In addition to trouble with the law, wagon master Willie Bolden explains that in between stops local whites “would drive by blowing their horns, purposely trying to spook the mules and us,” causing the mules to run off the road, which resulted in some minor injuries.⁷⁴ When *Commonweal* asked one

⁷¹ Freeman, 104.

⁷² Lackey, 95.

⁷³ Freeman, 102.

⁷⁴ Willie Bolden Interviewed by Roland Freeman, cited in Freeman, 127-128.

spectator for his opinion about the Mule Train, he scoffed, ““they’re making monkeys out of themselves.”” While some perceived the Mule Train as a laughable, carnivalesque display, the participants sought to perform their poverty for the nation, while enjoying the pleasures that traveling cross-country afforded.

On May 24 the Mule Train rolled through Starkville, home of Mississippi State University, where it continued to receive mixed reviews from local people and officials. Historian Hilliard Lackey claims that local college students played pranks on the weary activists,⁷⁵ but Roland Freeman’s photograph of a group of Mississippi State students holding a banner reading “Good Luck in D.C.” suggests that at least some students supported the campaign. Other students stood by with signs reading, “End the War Against the Poor,” “Black Control of Black Communities,” “End Racism: We Support Poor People’s March,” and “We Have a Dream, Too!” signaling their support.⁷⁶

While the police and some local whites demonstrated opposition to the PPC, most local people were not for or against the campaign so much as interested in seeing the spectacle of the Mule Train and experiencing the carnivalesque atmosphere its presence engendered. Hundreds of rural blacks and at times smaller contingent of whites appeared along the highways, to show their support for the campaign or simply witness the most exciting thing in town. Most spectators were simply awed by the sight of the Mule Train, while others were galvanized to form “emergency groups” to feed, clothe, and house the pilgrims, some of which promised to proceed on as local, grassroots organizations.

⁷⁵ Lackey, 101.

⁷⁶ Freeman, 53.

In the following days, the Mule Train plugged along through Columbus and on to the Mississippi-Alabama border. As the travelers headed down the Alabama highway flanked by an escort of state troopers, they reportedly saw billboards depicting King at what was labeled a communist camp and right wing political billboards calling to “K O The Kennedys.”⁷⁷ Freeman recounts that as the Mule Train entered its first major cities in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, “People’s curiosity and support were clearly felt, and the seeming incongruity of the Mule Train in the city soon gave way to the obvious parallels we saw between urban and rural poverty.”⁷⁸ After spending a couple of days in both Reform and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the Mule Train rounded out the month of May with stops in Cottondale and Bessemer, Alabama, where they lost one of their wagons.

On May 29, as the Mule Train rested in Tuscaloosa, the action on Capitol Hill was taking off as the Senate passed a five billion dollar housing bill 67-4 that provided the nation’s poor with assistance buying homes or renting quality apartments. That same day the NAACP finally demonstrated its support for the PPC, announcing that they would present a resolution in support of the campaign at their organization’s fiftieth meeting, which stated:

“The Poor People’s Campaign has dramatically demonstrated the overwhelming need for immediate government and private action to alleviate the plight of poor black people, poor white people, poor Indians, poor Spanish-speaking people, and indeed, all of the poor of the United States.”

While Congress and the NAACP acted to end poverty, the Mississippi state legislature took steps towards gender equality. Almost fifty years after women finally received the right to vote nationwide, this state, sadly behind the times in so many areas, passed a bill

⁷⁷ Lackey, 121-123.

allowing women to serve on state juries.⁷⁹ In the following days, the Mule Train proceeded through Alabama, making the arduous journey through the foothills of the Appalachians surrounding Birmingham. They arrived in the legendary civil rights city on June 2, where they would remain for the next few days.

June 4, 1968—just like April 4, 1968—was an extremely difficult day for the leaders and participants of the Poor People’s Campaign. While the Mule Train participants were eager to hear news about the presidential primary, they were shocked and saddened along with the rest of the nation when they heard that Palestinian terrorist Sirhan Sirhan had assassinated Democratic hopeful Bobby Kennedy. Mule Train participants attended memorial services at the legendary 16th Street Baptist Church to honor the fallen senator before moving on to another site of extreme violence against non-violent activist, Anniston, Alabama, where one of the Freedom Rider’s buses was set on fire in 1961. Robert Kennedy’s assassination caused an outpouring of emotion and renewed determination, as well as increased generosity from the nation, which enabled the Mule Train to acquire new shoes for the mules and new wheels for the wagons, and to make other necessary repairs before completing their arduous journey.

Most of the Mule Train participants were from Quitman County, but wherever the caravan stopped throughout Mississippi and Alabama the group picked up new participants. In Birmingham Ralph Abernathy’s entire family joined the group and traveled with the Mule Train on its remaining journey between Birmingham and Atlanta. This stretch of the journey was particularly difficult. Not only did the mules have to

⁷⁸ Freeman, 58-59.

⁷⁹ Lackey, 121.

muster the strength to make it up hills, the Mule Train also had to face a new problem—traveling downhill with no brakes. Participants frequently had to abandon their wagons and lend a hand pushing the Mule Train uphill, but going downhill with no brakes proved even more challenging. Lackey explains that these “would-be heroes” who were “toiling in anonymity . . . from the lofty perch of a wagon pulled by two mules” had to maneuver “ropes, poles, and other make-shift gadgets to improvise a braking system for the would-be-run-away wagons.”⁸⁰ The Mule Train’s downhill adventures not only thrilled and terrified passengers; the ride also frustrated other travelers and impeded their way.

Bertha Burres Johnson recounts:

“We were going down this slope, this hill. I guess it was a downgrade about two to three miles. Behind us was this eighteen-wheeler; he had to breakdown. It was exciting to see this eighteen-wheeler behind a mule train; we had seventeen wagons.”⁸¹

The image of an eighteen-wheeler stuck behind a train of mule-drawn wagons visually captured the sharp contradiction of rural poverty in a wealthy, modern, industrialized nation, precisely the point the PPC and Mule Train were trying to make.

While the participants remained unidentified, the Mule Train was able to display their poverty, their pride, and their persistence to people throughout the nation. Each night televised images of this outdated form of transportation set against the backdrop of modern highway systems served as a symbolic display of the limits of poor people’s mobility—both physical and economic—and at the same time the strength and determination of local poor people. PPC historian Gerald McKnight explains that the

⁸⁰ Lackey, 142, 147, 124-125.

⁸¹ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author; see also Freeman, 112.

press coverage was extensive and describes how the Mule Train and the press developed a mutually beneficial relationship:

“The national press, including some large southern dailies, the three major television networks, and Britain’s BBC, recognized good copy when they saw it . . . The SCLC ‘mule skimmers’ in charge of the wagon train were natural and shrewd showmen. They ensured that the protest march had a festive air with plenty of singing, joshing, and political high spirits. For example, marchers wore white armbands with the inscription ‘Mississippi Goddamn.’ The caravan’s lead wagon, reserved for Abernathy and Williams, was drawn by two mules dubbed ‘Stennis’ and ‘Eastland,’ after Mississippi’s incumbent segregationist senators.”⁸²

The press covered the highlights of the Mule Train’s journey and the events that took place in Resurrection City for the nation, while the Mule Train and the other caravans enabled the PPC participants to communicate directly with the nation’s citizens along their path.

Audiences hovered along the highway to get a glimpse of the Mule Train, and the participants used the canvasses covering the wagons to communicate their message to the local people and to the nation. One asked, “Which is Better? Send a Man to Moon or Feed Him on Earth?” while another proudly declared, “Everybody’s Got a Right To Work, Eat, Live.” Others invoked common movement slogans like “I Have a Dream,” “We Shall Overcome,” “Freedom.” Some were more poignant, like one that reminded southerners that their protest was grounded in their faith and exhibited the true teachings of Christianity “Don’t Laugh, Folks: Jesus was a Poor Man.”⁸³ John Cashin explains that he was responsible for many of the messages, such as “Stop the War, Feed the Poor” and “Jesus Was a Marcher Too,” which he suggests were televised five or six times a day.⁸⁴

⁸² McKnight, 97.

⁸³ Freeman, 34, 41, 42, 45, 49.

⁸⁴ John Cashin’s Prepared Comments, February 9, 1998, in Freeman, 124.

The Mule Train served as a traveling billboard for the Poor People's Campaign, boasting symbolic slogans and messages of protest in much the same manner inner-city youth in the mid-1970s bombed subways with graffiti to express their resistance to post-industrial inner city conditions.

In its first month of travel, the Mule Train covered approximately five hundred miles averaging about twenty-five miles per day. It took the caravan from May 13 to June 15 for the Mule Train to make its way from Marks, Mississippi to Atlanta, Georgia. The caravan made it through both Mississippi and Alabama with no major confrontations, just minor heckling from small contingents of southern whites and local or state police. The lack of resistance demonstrated the effectiveness of the civil rights movement since just three years earlier a smaller and shorter march along an Alabama highway between Selma and Montgomery resulted in one of the most violent and dramatic confrontations between activists and law enforcement in U.S. history. One reason why there were so few incidents was state troopers escorted the Mule Train through both Mississippi and Alabama. In addition to a police-escort, local, state, and federal officials kept extensive surveillance of the Mule Train, like that of the other regional caravans. In Mississippi alone, twenty-six uniformed officers and three plainclothes investigators from the state police, fourteen FBI agents, and one supervisor along with the network of informants so that the Mule Train was under around-the-clock surveillance.⁸⁵

The Mule Train had its final confrontation with state authorities just outside Bremen, Georgia on June 13. Georgia's Governor Lester Maddox ordered the state

troopers to block the entrance to Interstate 20 and arrested sixty-seven participants. Maddox offered to transport the group on flatbed trucks or provide an escort along an alternate path, but after a ninety-minute meeting between Sheriff Caude Abercrombie and Willie Bolden, a compromise was made, allowing the Mule Train to use the emergency lane of Interstate 20 between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.⁸⁶ The participants were shipped back to Douglasville, Georgia where they spent the night in the National Guard Armory.

The national press thoroughly covered the incidents in Marks and the initial days of the Mule Train's journey, but the coverage became erratic as the days wore on. When Freeman asked Wagon Master Willie Bolden about the media's coverage of the Mule Train, he explained that like many civil rights campaigns, "you get a lot of press coverage in the beginning," but "unless something dramatic is happening, they lose interest. When this Mule Train started in Marks, the press was everywhere; but after a few days they were almost all gone."⁸⁷ A *Newsweek* article recapping the PPC supported Bolden's perspective, reporting that the Mule Train was "all-but-forgotten."⁸⁸ Bolden explained that the press was a necessary component of the campaign because it communicated the PPC's purpose to people along the caravan's path. He argues that the press also protected the Mule Train, remarking, "I doubt that incident at the Georgia state line

⁸⁵ McKnight, 97.

⁸⁶ "Georgia Yields on March Mule Train," *Washington Post*, June 15, 1968. Having traveled each winter from Lubbock, Texas to visit my mother's family in Atlanta, primarily along Interstate 20, I cannot conceive of a train of mule-drawn covered wagons traveling alongside Atlanta drivers. Not only do they all drive "ninety or nothing" as my adage-full grandmother used to quip, but Interstate 20 travels through the heart of downtown Atlanta and now sits alongside byways named after the PPC's primary leaders—King, Abernathy, and Young.

⁸⁷ Willie Bolden Interview with, Roland Freeman cited in Freeman, 128.

⁸⁸ "Poverty: A Touch of Realism," *Newsweek*, June 24, 1968, 37.

would have even happened if the press had been there.”⁸⁹ Once the Mule Train became embroiled with a dispute with law enforcement agents, the media resumed its coverage.

The caravan finally arrived in Atlanta on June 15, where the weary travelers spent several days visiting King-related sites before they were shipped out on trains to Alexandria, Virginia. The *Atlanta Journal* reported that the Mule Train participants would “board the Southern Railway’s crack passenger train, ‘The Southerner,’ Monday night for an all-night ride to a suburb outside Washington, D.C.” SCLC paid for the tickets, which cost \$100 to \$150 for the one-way trip, which amounted to a total cost of \$2,000 and \$3,000, as well as an additional \$1,400 to ship the mules and wagons.⁹⁰ SCLC wanted to ensure that the Mule Train would arrive in time for the PPC’s big showcase, Solidarity Day, which had been postponed until June 19th to ensure maximum participation. When Roland Freeman questioned Joan Cashin about her feelings concerning the group being shipped on trains to D.C., she responded:

“I think in order to be kind to the people and the mules, it would be logical to do some shipping, particularly over the mountainous areas like the Appalachian and Blue Ridge that are so difficult to get over, between Georgia and the East Coast. I think that just getting out of Marks and through Alabama to Georgia, and the symbolism of arriving in Washington will be notice and announced—even though this may be torn apart by a few newsmen who’ll say we really didn’t accomplish what we set out to do.”⁹¹

Making their way all the way through Mississippi and Alabama and part of Georgia was quite an accomplishment in itself.

As for the mules, they had a difficult time both getting to Washington and receiving the attention they needed once they arrived. A Southern Railway spokesman

⁸⁹ Freeman, 128.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

explained to reporters the difficulty of locating a stock car for the mules, declaring, “We haven’t shipped livestock in years.”⁹² The mules also had trouble once they arrived in the D.C. area. Carol Honsa reported that, “Campaign officials apparently made no arrangements for feeding the animals.” The Arlington Animal Welfare League supplied them with food, while the Arlington County Fire Department provided water. Hosea Williams disputed the charges claiming that he gave the muleskinners money for food and supplies.⁹³

Once the Mule Train participants arrived in Alexandria, Virginia, most stayed at a nearby Methodist church center while others met up with friends and family in Resurrection City. Each day busses would coordinate which group would be picked up to participate in the day’s events.⁹⁴ On June 19, the wagons were reassembled in order for the Mule Train to join in with the some 50,000 people who traveled to Washington, D.C. for what ended up being the PPC’s grand finale, Solidarity Day. After making the lengthy and grueling journey, SCLC leader Andrew Young told the *New York Times* that the Mule Train would not make its final trek from Arlington National Cemetery to the Lincoln Memorial as part of the Solidarity Day festivities because “it would have cause

⁹¹ Freeman, 121.

⁹² Paul W. Valentine, “Rickety Mule Train Plods in to Wait for March” *Washington Post*, June 19, 1968.

⁹³ Carol Honsa, “Park Police Caring for March Mules,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 1968. Roland Freeman investigated what eventually happened to the mules after the PPC ended and found that they were taken to a family farm in Columbia, Maryland, while others were put out to pasture in central Virginia. See Freeman, 108.

⁹⁴ Freeman, 68.

too much ‘confusion’ in the march.”⁹⁵ Yet even their journey from Alexandria into

Washington made big news. Paul W. Valentine reported:

Traffic was tied up behind the mule train as Alexandria, Arlington County and Park Police shepherded the group along in the curb lane on the northbound side of the Parkway. The train moved at a steady gait except at two points—once when a wheel rim broke off a wagon and had to be fixed and later when an auto driver behind the last wagon began shouting angrily and found himself surrounded by about 35 youths from the train. The youths dared him to get out of his car. A Park Police sergeant moved in, dispersed the youths and directed the driver into the open lane around the mule train.⁹⁶

The contrast of the mule-drawn covered wagons traveling next to the sleek 1960s cars along a busy modern highway epitomized the hypocrisy of poverty in a nation of plenty, while the Mule Train blocking the busy capital traffic signified the effect the Poor People’s Campaign was having on the nation’s capital—it was stopping people in their tracks!

After making their dramatic appearance in the nation’s capital, the Mule Train participants dispersed. Many mingled in with the rest in Resurrection City, while some stayed in private homes in the area. As Bertha Burres Johnson and other Mule Train participants recounted, much of the spirit of the Mule Train was lost once they reached Resurrection City: “Everybody on the Mule Train was more together, much more together than in Resurrection City. They weren’t together at all there. There was all kind of trouble there. As soon as we got there, we got put out.”⁹⁷ When Roland Freeman asked wagon master and SCLC staff member Willie Bolden about whether he thought the Mule Train participants expectations had been met and whether their expectations

⁹⁵ “After an 1,100-Mile Trip, Mule Train Misses Rally,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1968.

⁹⁶ “Rickety Mule Train Plods in to Wait for March” *Washington Post*, June 19, 1968.

⁹⁷ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

changed when they reached Washington, he agreed with others that it was difficult to maintain unity once the group reached its destination:

“Well, as I recall, I don’t think they lost hope . . . The truth of the matter was that we really hadn’t gotten a lot of direction from senior SCLC staff. People just kind of got scattered, where before we had been together for some forty to fifty days, traveling down the highway through Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Then, all of a sudden, when we got our destination, people just got scattered.”⁹⁸

As a social movement in motion, the Mule Train fostered the unique feeling of community and harmony that traveling fosters—living together day by day, facing adversity together, and experiencing new places and new things together.

The Mule Train participants returned home shortly after their arrival after Congress revoked the PPC’s appeal for an extension for their permit to use the National Mall as their site of protest. Most returned home to Marks or their other hometowns after being forced out of Resurrection City, but many chose to take their one-way bus ticket as an opportunity to move somewhere new. Several of those who returned home feared the consequences of making the journey to D.C. A young woman from Marks, Minnie Lee Hills, confessed to a reporter, “I’m afraid to go back there to live; they might be mad at me for coming here.”⁹⁹ When Roland Freeman asked Myrna Copeland and Joan Cashin what they thought might happen to local PPC participants upon their return, Copeland stressed the need for black unity, not only among the poor, but also with middle-class blacks. She suggested that if the black community in Marks joined forces they could, as the majority, affect their economic and political situation:

“We don’t have to worry about changing the heart and the soul of the white man because economically we could force him to do 70 or 80 percent of what is right .

⁹⁸ Freeman, 128

⁹⁹ Quoted in Lackey, 120.

. . . Have you ever heard of Black Power? If 60 or 70 percent of the population is black, and they're united for civil rights, for making American the land of opportunity, then the white man has no choice but to toe the line."¹⁰⁰

When Freeman asked Joan Cashin if she thought the unity expressed in the PPC would prevent harassment and intimidation, she was less optimistic than Copeland but still felt that the PPC was worthwhile. She explained that while the movement would not stop local whites intimidation of blacks, their participation in the Mule Train and PPC might “serve as notice that they can't really run over them completely” but insisted that activists could not be concerned with the effects of their activism and must focus on the present:

“Being in this kind of thing, you have to have the attitude that Dr. King had. If you once make the decision that you are going to be in it up to your neck, you can't worry about what's going to happen, because if you do, then you are totally useless in any strategy you plan.”¹⁰¹

Marks residents and other Mule Train participants risked a great deal to fight for improved economic conditions and civil rights, and contributed to substantial changes in the Quitman County area.

REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY: “THAT WAS THE MOST SOULFUL EXPERIENCE I’VE EVER ENCOUNTERED”

Journalists and historians have deemed the Poor People's Campaign a failure, yet it was anything but for the small Delta town of Marks, Mississippi. Mule Train participants hold different perspectives on the PPC's overall effectiveness, but the Marks residents and Mule Train participants that both Roland Freeman and I have interviewed concur that the movement radically transformed their lives. Several Marks residents commented on receiving increased access to social services, job opportunities, and

¹⁰⁰ Joan Cashin Interviewed by Roland Freeman, cited in Freeman, 122.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

practical goods, while others commented on the psychological transformations the campaign fostered. The women from Marks that I encountered—most of whom were in their mid-to-late twenties and caring for multiple children at the time of the campaign—shared the most detailed descriptions of the changes they witnessed and expressed the deepest sentiments concerning the movement’s effects on their personal lives.

As one of the leaders of the Mule Train and a committed local activist, Bertha Burres Johnson’s experiences demonstrate how this national multi-racial anti-poverty movement transformed one woman’s life and how her views of the movement have changed over the years. When Roland Freeman interviewed Burres Johnson in October of 1997, she recounted the disappointment many felt after returning home: “most of us came back here to the same old same old. Over the years change has come, but it has been very slow. You’d be hard pressed today to find people who were on the Mule Train. They all had to leave here to find work.”¹⁰² While each of the Marks residents I encountered expressed their disappointment in Marks today and the lack of opportunity available, Burres Johnson and others suggested that there were some significant changes that occurred as a result of the PPC’s organizing efforts in the area. When I interviewed Burres Johnson in 2006, she recounted how her participation in the PPC changed her relationship with local officials:

For me, it was quite an experience. And when I got back here, I didn’t have any problem with anyone. I went to see the health people about a health problem that I needed assistance and they was very nice to me because I guess they were afraid not to be because they thought I would call the SCLC staff if they weren’t.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Joan Cashin Interview, cited in Freeman, 114.

¹⁰³ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

Local officials' knowledge of her role as a leader on the Mule Train and as a staff member for SCLC might account for the reaction to her as an individual, yet many participants insist that the changes that were occurring were not just individual but county-wide.

The new dynamic between the white power structure and local blacks was significant, but it was the grassroots efforts of activists like Burres Johnson and the information the PPC made available to her and others that empowered Marks' poor to utilize the available services. Burres Johnson explains:

Because then people began to learn about social security and food stamps because everybody didn't know about that, just a few them knew that they could apply for food stamps, apply for social security, that they could get dental care. It was just that way. People were here, and they were just ignorant to everything that they had a right to. And by me going up there, it opened up my life to where I could share with them.¹⁰⁴

The PPC provided local people with information that empowered them to be experts about their own situation, and protesting often gave them the courage to help others once they returned home. Burres Johnson explains her contribution:

“They gave me the job of going all over the county to check on people that needed help, whether it was housing, social security, food stamps, or whatever. I did that, and whenever I found them, I made an appointment for them to come to town, and I had to go get them.”¹⁰⁵

She reflects fondly on her position but also expresses her frustration with people who wanted her help but failed to show up themselves to organize.

Bertha Burres Johnson recognized that knowledge was the first step in gaining power—that people had to understand their rights and witness the dignity that comes

¹⁰⁴ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

from representing themselves before they would get involved.¹⁰⁶ She continued her work with the Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE) and with the Quitman County Development Organization (QCDO) when it was established in 1977 as a membership-based affiliate of MACE, and then worked at Head Start for fifteen years until she retired. When asked whether she agreed with journalists and historians that the PPC was a failure, she replied, “I don’t think it was a failure, but I do think it was a beginning. There was a lot done in this county to help us later on in life. And their still trying to help us, and we’re trying to help ourselves, too.”¹⁰⁷ Self-empowerment and self-determination were what most poor people desired above all else, not government handouts, as many Americans assumed.

Another woman who helped ensure that the national movement was sustained on a local level was Sister Marilyn Aiello. Jean Smith Freas, a reporter for WRC, NBC’s Washington affiliate, who covered the Mule Train insists that because of women like Aiello, increased medical care became available in the Delta:

“Look no farther than Locust Street. Thirty years ago, the sick and needy in Marks had no real health care. Then a young nun in Washington, scrubbing clothes for the Mule Train, thought she knew a better use for her talents than teaching high school science. The bishop agreed with her. In time she became known as Dr. Marilyn Aiello, of the De Porres Delta Health Ministries.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author. Burres Johnson emphasizes how important education was in empowering local blacks and inspiring them to help themselves. When one of the organizations she provided secretarial services had her conduct a survey of senior citizens to find out their needs, she recounts how “most of them said that they wanted to learn how to write. They wanted to learn how to sign their name instead of marking the X. And some of them said ‘I want to learn how to count my money. And some of them said, ‘I would like to learn how to read.’”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Prepared comments by Jean Smith Freas, late 1997, cited in Freeman, 130.

The changes that came after the PPC stretched beyond the city limits of Marks and reached poor people across the Delta. Women like Burres Johnson and Dr. Aiello helped others navigate the complicated bureaucracy of social services and understand what they were entitled to as impoverished citizens living in a wealthy nation.

Marks native and Mule Train participant Augusta Denson agrees that the changes the PPC brought to Quitman County were more widespread than simple individual acts to quell local resistance. Denson explains that the local movement directly affected both job opportunities and welfare administration in the area.

It was a good thing they did. At that time in Mississippi there wasn't no good jobs, and they started bringing the good jobs. We got one factory, the other's closed now, but one's still open. Before that, we didn't have no jobs except for working in private homes as domestics . . . people on welfare, they wasn't giving you more than ten or fifteen dollars, that's all you'd get. But when we went up there and explained it to them, it did go up. It went up to forty, and then it started going up and up . . . I didn't get no welfare until I come back . . . I really think it had something to do with it. They would turn you down; they would treat us so bad at the welfare office. You had to tell them all what your history was like government came in and kicked them out.¹⁰⁹

Denson experienced the impact of the PPC on Marks' social services first-hand. She explained that before the PPC she was not receiving any social security for her children after their father's death, but with assistance from the campaign and local activists she learned how to navigate the system and receive what her family deserved. And she even received a new house for her family when she returned from Washington, after having been kicked off a plantation for her participation in the PPC.

The increase in social services and the PPC's effect on the local power structure had their limits, but the psychological transformation many PPC participants underwent

¹⁰⁹ Augusta Denson Interview.

is something that would last a lifetime. The movement had a particularly strong influence on some of the female participants. When Roland Freeman interviewed Bertha Burres Johnson in 1997, she expressed how her participation in the Mule Train and the PPC not only changed her job situation, but also transformed her personal relationships:

“I gained the courage to speak up for myself. I got married young, you see, and the first time I spoke up to my husband I almost had a nervous breakdown. He was not very secure and had trouble coping with life, so he sort of dominated me—you understand what I mean? SCLC taught me that there is no harm in speaking up. That’s the only way you can let people know what you think and feel.”¹¹⁰

Other women reported similar transformations in their dealings with men of both races. When Roland Freeman asked Dora Lee Collins from Clarksdale, Mississippi about her trip to Washington she explained:

“I really enjoyed the whole experience and I learned what we could do if we stuck together. I never marched like that before. I saw my government turn us down. But the experience lifted my spirits and changed the way I think forever. I got back here and I didn’t say ‘yes sa boss’ anymore.”¹¹¹

Despite the fact that the PPC was unable to convince the government to enact a guaranteed job or income, and many other movement demands, their experiences along the caravans and in Washington, D.C. changed many participants’ views of the world.

Not only did many participants abandon any form of deference to southern whites, but some also experienced a new sense of universalism. Augusta Denson suggests, “It made my life better in a lot of ways.” Her participation in the PPC not only resulted in a new home and better social services, it also taught her “how to treat people,

¹¹⁰ Roland Freeman Interview with Bertha Burres Johnson, Marks, Mississippi, October 1997, cited in Freeman, 114.

too. I ain't got no hatred in my heart. We came together as a big family, white, black, Mexican, Puerto Rican. All of us marched together, hand in hand."¹¹² Another leader on the Mule Train, Doris Shaw Baker remembers the journey as "the most soulful experience I've ever encountered. The old folks had so much soul." Shaw recounts the courage the Mule Train inspired in her during confrontations with police and angry local whites and how her participation convinced her to remain an activist.¹¹³ These women, now in their sixties and seventies, agree that the Mule Train and PPC brought important changes to Quitman County and improved their individual lives.

While Marks residents' perspectives on the PPC reflect their individual transformations and local changes, other participants present a variety of opinions on the effectiveness of the movement. Roland Freeman—the only person who both participated in the campaign and researched it from the perspectives of other participants—presents a range of perspectives on the PPC in his *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*. He recounts that as a photographer for the Mule Train and PPC, he was "exposed to an exciting combination of organizing, teaching, learning, planning, and reacting. By the time it ended, I understood far more about myself, the world, and how we affect one another."¹¹⁴ While Roland Freeman recounts in 1997 how the Mule Train

¹¹¹ Roland L. Freeman, "Mule Train: A Thirty-Year Perspective on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Poor People's Campaign of 1968," *Southern Cultures* 4:1 (Spring 1998): 91-119.

¹¹² Augusta Denson Interview.

¹¹³ Doris Shaw Baker Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006. Shaw worked on Shirley Chisholm's 1968 presidential campaign and with SCLC on a medical workers' strike in North Carolina in 1969 after her experience with the PPC.

¹¹⁴ Freeman, 131.

and PPC affected his life, like many others he was critical of the movement's leadership who he felt had manipulated the participants:

“These poor, often hungry, generally unschooled folks had led hard lives full of risk and uncertainty. And here they were again, never having the whole picture of what was going on; being told to be here or there, to hurry up and wait. They were put on display and regularly placed in potentially confrontational and violent settings. They continuously heard rumors about leadership screwing up, holding back, or selling out.”

Freeman was one of many to suggest that too few logistics were communicated to the PPC's participants. Yet, he also recognized that most participants knew the sacrifices they would have to make if they joined the PPC:

“Through it all, the Mule Train people understood that they ultimately had to put their bodies—and often their lives—on the line. They needed to leave home for an indefinite time, to undergo the stress and rigors of the journey and their living conditions in D.C., to speak out publicly about who they were and how they lived. And then, individually they had to return home to the same settings they'd left or to start new lives in new places—often to face added hostility from employers and local political structures that looked unkindly at their participation in the campaign.”¹¹⁵

The testimony from Marks residents suggests that the opposite was true—their participation in the Mule Train and PPC seems to have provoked local officials to respond to at least some of their demands.

CONCLUSION

The Mule Train demonstrated the power of the caravan as a moving political theater, representing rural, southern poverty to local communities throughout the Southeast. Along with enabling the participants to perform their poverty for all the spectators along their path, the caravans were both a form of labor and leisure. Not only

¹¹⁵Freeman, 132.

did the Mule Train provide participants with an opportunity to share their experiences with one another and better understand the roots of their shared poverty and oppression, the caravan also gave people who might not have ever made it out of the Delta an opportunity to travel. Participants were able to see a good portion of the Southeast in some detail, since they were traveling slowly on mule-drawn wagons, and experience both the pleasures and problems that this sort of trip entailed. The Mule Train gave poor people who worked hard, whether at a low-paying job or at figuring out how to get by without one, with a chance to have some fun.

While scholars and the media might have deemed the PPC a failure, it was anything but for the participants from Marks, Mississippi. The caravan was an exciting experience for participants, and the effects of the movement on this Delta community ran deep. Despite the PPC's clear significance for Marks, it has yet to be included into the master-narrative of the movement. If we incorporate those campaigns that challenged the unequal distribution of wealth in the U.S. and exposed how racism, sexism, and regional exploitation have led to the cyclical poverty that people of color continue to face in disproportionate numbers, then we are forced to recognize that the movement continues. Looking at the local effects of this national movement challenges past assessments of the PPC and demonstrates the importance of linking the local grassroots campaigns with national movements. The following chapters chronicle the rise and fall of Resurrection City and explore how the nation received this temporary shantytown on the National Mall and its residents' daily protests

PART THREE

Poverty on Display: The Rise and Fall of Resurrection City

The National Mall, renamed “Resurrection City,” provided space for the most oppressed and ignored population in the country to demonstrate their agency in proximity to the nation’s leaders and institutions where they protested every day in a city where they could access resources and information lacking at home. The building of this temporary city of the poor demonstrated how easily people could create a community when working together. The services provided in the city demonstrated the effects social programs could have on the poor once impoverished citizens gained access to available programs. Francis Piven and Richard Cloward argue that “poor people cannot defy institutions to which they have no access and to which they make no contribution.”¹ In addition to a place to stay and access to the many social and cultural services, Resurrection City provided participants with proximity to government buildings where participants launched their daily protests. Participants learned how to use their voice to effect changes in their lives and gained strength and determination simply by confronting their elected representatives. Just airing their grievances provided many participants with a new sense of self-worth, as well as a deeper understanding of the structural roots of their poverty,

Richard Kurin, Director of the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife Program and Cultural Studies, acknowledges scholars’ growing recognition that public displays that attempt to communicate broader meanings about societal issues to the

diverse public is “serious business.” Kurin suggests that, “We know well enough that public displays often reflect cultural policies and broad public sentiment, but they may also serve as vehicles for generating or foregrounding those sentiments and developing those policies.”² The City demanded the national media’s spotlight as participants unveiled their dramatic performance of poverty with the National Mall as their stage. Their claim to the National Mall, a site that remains both revered and contested,³ contributed to the negative reception of the PPC and its participants. Each of the chapters in part three considers how the participants represented themselves, both inside and outside Resurrection City, and how the government, the media, and the public responded to their pleas for a radical redistribution of wealth. Exploring how participants built a community on the National Mall, how they used the site as a display of poverty and as a home base for daily protests, and how the rest of the nation responded to the occupation fosters a better understanding of what the PPC accomplished, and why, despite these accomplishments, scholars and the media continue to either dismiss the movement or cast it as a failure.

¹ Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*, 23.

² Richard Kurin, “Cultural Policy Through Public Display,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 29 Issue 1, (Summer 1995): 3-14, 3.

³ See Fath Davis Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost: Ethnic Museums on the Mall, Part I: The National Holocaust Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian,” *Radical History Review*, Vol. 68, (1997): 79-100.

CHAPTER SIX

Creating a City Within a City: The Rise of Resurrection City

“All our citizens would start out equal because they would arrive at Resurrection City in equal need: No one would have a larger house or a fuller stomach merely because of what he or she had inherited . . . No one would need an extra push because no one would be have a head start. No one would be greedy and no one would be envious. We would all be back on the frontier, where liberty and equality were not mutually exclusive ideas, but achievable goals. It was an invigorating prospect, and I found myself looking forward to the establishment of this City on the Hill, where we would live the Good Life as a witness to the entire nation.”¹

-Rev. Ralph Abernathy

“Resurrection City afforded an opportunity that I don’t think will occur again for the next hundred years, and that is—it brought people together that had the same thing in common . . . They came from all of the poor areas of the country, and they were all races, and creeds, and colors of people. If you can gather these folks together, and harness their energies, that is seeds for revolution right there.”²

-Cornelius Givens

“The people built the Many Races Soul Center and painted their souls on Hunger’s Wall. They had the Coretta Scott King Day Care Center and the God’s Eye Bakery. City Hall, medical and dental facilities, a great food tent felled by storms, houses of simplicity, and houses of creativity. But there was no jail and there were no landlords. The American Indians permitted use of the land for Resurrection City.”³

-PPC Brochure

After riots shattered much of Washington, D.C. in the wake of King’s assassination in early April, the government hoped to prevent the PPC from moving forward. If canceling the PPC proved to be too difficult, Congress and the Department of Justice, along with FBI and local law enforcement officials, planned to control the campaign, both spatially and temporally. The nation’s capital had suffered eleven deaths, 1,200 injuries, and over nineteen million dollars in losses due to arson and looting. The federal and local government were determined to do everything in their power to guarantee that no more violence or property damage would ensue as a result of the PPC. As the nine regional caravans made their way across the country, Under Secretary of the

¹ Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 503-504.

² Cornelius Givens, NY PPC Coordinator, Interviewed by Katherine Shannon, Ralph Bunche Oral History Project, tape #223.

³ The Poor People’s Campaign: A Photographic Journal, KL, SCLC, 179:19.

Army, David McGiffert, told a group of senators that the Pentagon had a “very detailed civil-disturbance plan” with 1,000 National Guardsmen and 8,000 federal troops—approximately three times the number of participants SCLC expected—prepared to be on “a half-hour alert” in case any trouble broke out in the nation’s capital. While the participants launched their caravans to Washington, dissent from Congress grew. Republican Senator Karl Mundt of South Dakota warned, “We have to be ready for big trouble,” insisting that there would be “a lot of people who will come under these terms—a free ride here and a free ride home and free meals while they are here—and free lodging, too.”⁴ Senator Mundt was absolutely correct. Plenty of participants joined the PPC for a free trip to Washington and free food and lodging. After all, who would pass up this opportunity if there was no food in the house, or if there was no house at all? Most participants had never been far from home and welcomed the opportunity to travel to a new place and meet different types of people. And they recognized that this was a special place—the nation’s capital—where they could directly confront their government.

But that is not all the participants would receive. Many, for the first time in their lives, would have medical and dental exams, experience entertainment from the nation’s top acts, receive new clothes and other desired belongings, share with members of different races, represent themselves in city government, and learn from professors, activists, and each other. They would also have a home that enabled them to confront their political representatives face-to-face on a daily basis. The Senator’s assumption that poor people posed a threat to the safety of Washington residents and government officials reveals the pervasiveness of stereotypes of the poor as impulsive and menacing, while his

⁴ “A Threat of Anarchy in Nation’s Capital,” *USA News & World Report*, May 20, 1968, 47.

disdain for the free trip, lodging, and food demonstrates that many in Congress did not see basic needs as civil rights. Resurrection City challenged both of these perspectives.

This chapter begins by chronicling the design and construction of this temporary shantytown and explores the many social services residents could access during their stay. Along with shelter and other basic services, such as power lines, portable latrines, and phone booths, participants had access to a wide range of social services such as childcare and health care, as well as shared meals together in a huge mess hall, enjoyed entertainment from some of the nation's biggest stars and folk artists at the All Souls Cultural Center, and accessed information about their history, their rights as citizens, and protest tactics at the Poor People's University. Participants experienced the satisfaction of building their own homes and contributing to the design of their communities. SCLC declared that the ultimate goal for the temporary city was "the resurrection of the living concept of community . . . An integral part of community, both in its ability to function and in the need for participation and involvement of the entire community is service."⁵ While the poor had very little control over their daily lives in their own neighborhoods, participants were able to help direct their temporary community's future. Although dysfunctional at times, Resurrection City was a full-fledged, self-run city of the poor with its very own zip code, 20013.⁶

Chapter six not only demonstrates the many benefits participants experienced in Resurrection City—challenging journalists and scholars who deem the campaign a failure but who have virtually ignored this element of the PPC—it also considers the

⁵ Draft, Community Representation of Resurrection City, KL, SCLC, 177:15.

⁶ "The Scene at Zip Code 20013," *Time*, May 24, 1968.

complications of conducting a national, multiracial, anti-poverty movement while running a city within a city. Despite all of the services the city provided, leaders struggled to keep the movement united as the various ethno-racial and regional groups self-segregated inside the city, while the leaders and some groups never even resided in the temporary shantytown. The residents chose to arrange their houses largely according to race, but they mingled during meals and the many cultural events that occurred in and out of Resurrection City.

PLANNING “THE NEW CITY OF HOPE”

The plans for the temporary shantytown emerged slowly as SCLC’s leaders mobilized the nation and local activists organized their communities for participation in the PPC. Along with the overwhelming logistics of organizing a national anti-poverty campaign and preparing approximately 3,000 poor people to caravan to Washington, PPC leaders had to figure out how to design and construct an entire city with all the necessary basic social services. As a first step towards planning the construction and administration of what at this point referred to as “the New City of Hope,” SCLC invited potential volunteers to choose from a handful of different committees. One option was the Alternate Housing Committee, which was responsible for finding additional housing in the D.C. area in private homes, churches, gymnasiums, and hotels to handle overflow from the City. Volunteers could also choose to organize local social services to assist residents during their stay and get referrals for once they returned home. Committees were also formed to handle food, sanitation, transportation, the building and layout for the temporary city, and procurement of necessary goods for all the various committees.

The PPC's leaders also made plans to recreate the Freedom Schools activists had introduced during the summer of 1964's Freedom Summer project and formed an entertainment committee with some of the nation's top black stars to ensure a satisfactory stay for the residents.⁷

On March 16, the committees met for the first time to report on their activities. At this stage SCLC planned to have the participants arrive in Washington during the first days of May, yet most committees had just formed or were still seeking members and had little news to report other than plans for future meetings. The Food Committee reported that they were looking for local sites to cook hot meals that would then be transported to the site, which was still yet to be determined, but indicated that they had secured the support of the Cooks' Union. The Medical Committee had been the most active and successful, having received an offer from a Seventh Day Adventists to provide a staffed mobile medical unit. This committee was also busy recruiting local doctors, nurses, medical secretaries, and paramedical aides with the goal of providing not only emergency care, but also conducting routine physical exams and collecting medical case histories. The Medical Committee had also determined that the Building and Sites Committee should oversee sanitation rather than their committee to facilitate coordination between these two components.

The Building and Sites Committee reported that they had still not determined the location for the "New City of Hope." While the symbolic value of the site originally was their chief criterion, the group decided that a privately owned site was preferable to facing negotiations with the government over public space. The committee of architects

⁷ "New City" Committees, KL, SCLC, 177:19.352

and designers insisted that a minimum of fifteen acres was needed to create a functioning city with approximately 3,000 residents. The committee had two frontrunners at this stage. The Xavierian Seminary had offered forty acres that provided access to water, electricity, and sewage, and had cooking facilities on site, a swimming pool and visibility from highway 495. Another option presented was Bolling Field, which reportedly offered “many advantages symbolically and geographically,” but was publicly owned land.⁸

On April 9, SCLC distributed a final list of the leaders for the growing list of committees that would oversee the next stage of the PPC. In addition to the committees that met in March, newer committees had just solidified or emerged. SCLC established a Volunteers Bureau in Washington located at the Federation of Civil Associations to oversee local donations and volunteers for all of the various committees. Other committees that emerged at this time focused on publicity, recreation, college and youth involvement, education, legislative research, and legal services.⁹

The Legal Services Committee emerged in early April, just before King’s death, when he appointed the Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) to oversee all legal aspects of the PPC. In addition to negotiating with the government for the City’s site and on how to handle mass arrests, this group was responsible for serving as legal counsel for all of the various PPC committees, providing two to three lawyers to advise each committee. Local lawyers, primarily from the Washington and D.C. Bar Associations, served as counsel with non-professionals performing liaison work between

⁸ Meeting of Committee Chairmen, SCLC, Sat, March 16, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:19.

⁹ PPC Committees, April 9, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:19.

volunteer lawyers and local courts. The committee was also responsible for serving as counsel for any participants or PPC leaders who were arrested during protests or at the City site. Frank D. Reeves, Professor of Law at Howard University and Kennedy campaign aide served as chairman of the committee, with Leroy B. Clarke, Assistant Director and Counsel for LDF and Head of the National Office for the Rights of the Indigent (NORI), serving as chief counsel. Marion Wright of the LDF served as head of the Legislative Research Committee and assisted both committees with legal efforts. In addition to professional staff, law school student volunteers assisted the legal staff and would accompany participants on their daily protests at government buildings to advise participants of their legal rights as events transpired.¹⁰

PPC leaders also formed a General Services & Administration (GSA) unit that would oversee and coordinate all of the various committees, as well as manage all maintenance, supplies, and sanitation for the city. The chief sociologist at the Bureau of Social Science Research, Al Gellin, served as chairman of the committee, while Michael Finkelstein, a postal worker on temporary leave, served as head of city planning. Nancy Iden, a local housewife, took charge of registration. The GSA would remain responsible for coordinating the various social service committees throughout the city's existence, including the health services, food services, childcare, and recreation committees.¹¹

John Wiebenson, Associate Professor at the University of Maryland's New School of Architecture and chair of the Building and Sites Committee, comments that most committee members were local white professionals but that the group did include

¹⁰ Legal Services Committee, KL, SCLC, 178:40.

¹¹ Fact Sheet, General Services Administration, KL, SCLC, 178:26.

many black professionals and some local poor. Anthony Henry, a black sociologist on leave from working with a Chicago community program, headed the various committee chairmen in their weekly meetings and served as a liaison with SCLC, who still controlled the finances and made major decisions but who were nowhere to be found until right before the PPC kicked off its Washington phase. As Wiebenson explains, “Basically, then, we were part of a large body of part-time planners working fairly closely with the local representative of a distant and rather scattered client.”¹² Almost all parties involved in the PPC complained about how disconnected SCLC’s leadership was from what was going on in Washington. The D.C. staff scrambled to plan the creation of a city within a city already on the brink of chaos.

An additional report on the various committees’ activities on May 3rd revealed some of the gender biases that existed within the organization and their attitudes about appropriate roles for men and women. The procurement committee specified that it needed two men to help set up a new office on U Street and two to four people to serve as inventory managers, including in parentheses, “(These can be women).” Yet the committee also requested two teams of four people to load and unload supplies without any indication of gender preference. The Building and Sites Committee also issued gendered requests for volunteers, indicating that they needed for to five women to cook lunch for volunteer builders.¹³ Despite these distinctions, several women did hold leadership positions within the PPC.

¹² John Wiebenson’s “Planner’s Notebook: Planning and Using Resurrection City,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (November 1969): 405-411, 406.

¹³ Comments on Committee List, May 3, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:13. The other committees making requests for volunteers made no distinctions between men and women’s abilities to perform these

On May 11, just two days before the City would be open for residents to move in, the Social Services Committee reported on their goals and activities. The committee—headed by Dr. Shirley McKuen, Associate Director of the National Association of Social Workers, and Faye Sigmond, a full-time SCLC staff member and social worker on leave from the Jewish Social Service Agency—reported on their ambitious goals to meet all of the residents’ basic needs. They intended to establish day care centers for children under six that would service up to fifty children and include an infant center, with plans for additional centers to be built as needed. Nursery school teachers from both public organizations like Headstart and private local daycare centers volunteered to work at the centers, while participants would fill in any gaps. The Committee also planned to establish a center for the elderly who could not participate in the daily protests and provide counseling services available with volunteer social workers on site. Volunteer psychologists and speech therapists would provide treatment throughout the participants’ stay, while social workers would give participants contacts information so they could access services once they returned home. In addition to these professional volunteers, many local housewives and high school and college students would be on-hand to supplement where needed.¹⁴

jobs. Requests for drivers for the Transportation Committee and volunteers to sell bumper stickers, buttons, posters, and cards for the Contributions and Donations Committee did not mention gender at all. The Entertainment Committee called for “men and women with knowledge of the performing arts,” while the Publicity Committee solicited help from several “general office workers” and people interested in learning to use media equipment. None of the committees indicated any racial preference, except for the education committee, which indicated that there was “a special need for Black teachers, Indian teachers, and Spanish speaking teachers (both experienced and non-experienced).”

¹⁴ Fact Sheet Social Services Committee, May 11, 1968, KL, SCLC, 180:1.

DESIGNING RESURRECTION CITY

The group that faced the most urgent deadlines was the Building and Structures Committee. Planning began just a month before the original starting date for construction. John Wiebenson—a graduate of Harvard College who had worked as part of the Engineer Corp. and for several San Francisco firms before joining the faculty at the University of Maryland’s new School of Architecture—headed up the project along with James Goodell of Urban America, Kenneth Jadin of the Department of Architecture at Howard University, and Tunney Lee, a local architect and planner. Originally, the group was asked to simply advise on the placement and occupancy of donated tents, but the tents never appeared, and the committee played an increasingly central role in the development of the temporary city.

The architects developed two models—one for families and one for dormitories that held five to six people. They compared their design with others, but there were few precedents other than army camps and migratory worker camps. Wiebenson explains that the team used a “sketch problem” at Howard University to present alternate models and reviewed additional proposals from local architects. The architects built prototypes to test the structures’ durability, functionality, and ease of construction. Wiebenson describes the final model as “triangular in section, with floor and roof panels of plywood on 2x4’s. A plastic membrane was used at the ridges to admit light without loss of privacy and to make a simple waterproof joint.” The weather resistant design quickly became an essential component as torrential rains plagued the encampment throughout much of its existence. The committee’s primary goals of for construction systems were as follows:

(1) shelter and services for the residents soon after their arrival; (2) severe economy of materials; (3) full use of all labor resources; (4) durability; and (5) protection from the weather. This suggested that shelter structures should be made of components prefabricated by volunteers and assembled by residents.¹⁵

In addition to the housing units, the structures team designed large tents for dining halls made of plywood with wood floors in case of weather problems. Refrigerated trucks would be on hand to store the food, and chemical toilets would be left at the site.

On April 24, the committee met to construct the prototype dormitory unit on the grounds of Xavierian College. Wiebenson recounts the unique mix of people that gathered to help construct the prefabricated parts that would enable participants to build their own homes in the City:

The volunteer workers (suburban housewives and do-it-yourself husbands, Washington high school students, college students from Berkeley, Michigan and Harvard, a carpenter from New Hampshire and a minister from New York, and a number of local Catholic brothers) were enthusiastic. The components for one unit could be made in about three minutes.¹⁶

SCLC invited the press to photograph and report on the model and had Wiebenson on hand to explain the details of the design and construction and answer any questions.

Participants would also be on hand to perform how the units would be used in the “New City of Hope.”¹⁷

The following day, the Senate’s Committee on Government Operations held a “Conference on Problems Involved in the Poor Peoples’ March on Washington.” The Chairman of the Committee, Senator John McClellan of Arkansas, was a staunch opponent of the PPC and carried a lengthy discussion with several other senators

¹⁵ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 405-411, 406-407.

¹⁶ John Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 4, John Wiebenson Writings, 1968-1969, Wisconsin Historical Society.

concerning why the PPC should not take place. The Senators grilled government employees for details about the movement and how the city planned to handle the onslaught of poverty crusaders. The senators were particularly interested to know the site SCLC planned to use for their camp-in. Winifred G. Thompson, Director of Public Welfare for the District of Columbia explained:

Tentative plans called for a camp-in on the Mall. The whole focus of their plan was to dramatize certain inequities as far as benefits to the poor peoples were concerned, one being proper housing, therefore, a camp-in would demonstrate the type of shanty towns in which many of them lived.¹⁸

The seventy-seven-page transcript this hearing produced reflected the Congress' frustration with the PPC's secrecy about its plans, as this Committee rehashed the same questions over and over again with government employees in an unsuccessful attempt to discover SCLC's next step.

The Building and Sites Committee originally proposed five potential locations that were the right size, provided easy access to government buildings, had suitable environmental qualities, and provided sufficient symbolism, but the final decision would not be made until just days before the first caravan arrived. Anthony Henry, the Deputy Coordinator of the PPC, was responsible for organizing and overseeing construction of the City since SCLC leaders arrived with the first caravans. He explains that the chaotic nature of SCLC's plans for the site was somewhat intentional:

Well, at the very beginning of it, we were talking about not getting permission from the government to set up the camp. So the theory was that we were going to move in and very quickly establish some things for people to live in and then after

¹⁷ Memo to Assignment Editors Wednesday, April 24, 1968, KL, SCLC, 178:30.

¹⁸ Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Government Operations, "Conference on Problems Involved in the Poor Peoples' March on Washington, D.C." (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968): 1-77, Southern California Library.

we had our tents completed we'd start worrying about the utilities and administration. But, we finally evolved into a situation where we were negotiating with the Government and working out a place that the city should be built.¹⁹

The lack of definitive plans annoyed the press and infuriated congressional leaders.

SCLC not only could not determine the location of the City, they could not even settle on a name. Originally called the New City of Hope, Andrew Young explains that a charity group of the same name objected, forcing the leaders to find a new name. Young remembers that the name was used “to symbolize the idea of rebirth from the depths of despair and oppression.”²⁰ Abernathy recounts that Resurrection City was actually one of the names originally proposed for the City but that it was not used until the staff met again after King’s assassination. While Young makes no reference to King in his memory of the name change, Abernathy reflects in his autobiography:

When we came back to discuss the project after Martin’s death, the name seemed even more appropriate . . . We wanted to make the project a living memorial to Martin and what he had dreamed of, so that through the success of our campaign he would be resurrected in the fulfilled aspirations of the poor people of America, who would live better, fuller lives for him, now that he had died for them.²¹

Abernathy also insisted that the name, perhaps due to its religious implications, would, in his words, “counter the new wave of cynicism and anger that was sweeping across the nation in the wake of the assassination, a hatred that Stokely Carmichael and his followers were growing powerful on.”²² While many within the PPC were attempting to unite black power and civil rights activists, Abernathy hoped to distance himself and the

¹⁹ Anthony R. Henry Interviewed by Katherine Shannon, 7/15/1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Project, tape # 225.

²⁰ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 481.

²¹ Abernathy, 501.

²² *Ibid.*

PPC from the militant rhetoric of black power and emphasize SCLC's roots in the concept of a beloved Christian community.

On May 10, just two days before the first caravan—the Freedom Train—would arrive in Washington in need of food and shelter, government officials and SCLC leaders finally reached a compromise on the location for the camp-in. *Washington Post* reporter Ben Gilbert reported that while SCLC was keeping the public and government officials guessing about where the site would be, behind the scenes a “small group of key federal officials had been negotiating with SCLC leaders to iron out plans” since March. An essential player was the Reverend Walter E. Fauntroy, Vice Chairman of the newly elected City Council and SCLC's Washington representative, who Gilbert described as central for his skill in “mediating disputes and encouraging practical discussion rather than rhetoric. In the end, he suggested the compromise site.”²³ The government granted SCLC a National Park Service permit to use the revered space of the National Mall for its “Resurrection City,” the staging ground for the PPC's next phase.

The plot included fifteen acres alongside the reflecting pool in West Potomac Park that stretched between two of the most venerated national monuments—the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Abernathy was thrilled with the results since the site not only included “the famous reflecting pool,” the City would be built on what Abernathy deemed as “about fifteen acres of the most beautifully kept grass in the world, and we concluded that we had acquired one of the best pieces of real estate

²³ Ben Gilbert and the staff of the *Washington Post*, *Ten Blocks from the White House: Anatomy of the Washington Riots of 1968* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 197.

available at the time.”²⁴ Andrew Young reflects on the contrasts of the site on the Mall: “It was lush and green with fresh spring growth but surrounded by the cold white marble of official Washington.”²⁵ The goal of the PPC was to create a contrast of their own between the poverty of the participants and the affluence of Washington, and the site on the National Mall furthered this goal.

In exchange for access to such a visible, accessible, and symbolic site, PPC leaders agreed to restrict their stay to thirty-six days—May 11 through June 16—and limit the temporary shantytown’s occupancy to just 3,000 people.²⁶ The six-page permit prohibited firearms, liquor, and open fires in the City and required that SCLC provide sanitation services, garbage removal, and bathroom facilities and adhere to all local safety regulations. One major concession to PPC leaders included in the permit was that the U.S. Park Police were unable to enter the City without an invitation, despite the fact that they had jurisdiction over all federal parklands.²⁷ Washington’s officialdom would later regret this concession when SCLC’s security force proved to be more troublesome than most residents

EARLY PROBLEMS

From the outset the campaign was chaotic and slow to respond to problems. SCLC Executive Director, Rutherford, suggested that the organization had only raised a

²⁴ Abernathy, 505.

²⁵ Young, 481.

²⁶ “‘Poor March’ on Washington: A City Braced for Trouble,” *US News & World Report*, May 20, 1968, 11.

²⁷ Gilbert, 197.

fraction of what was needed,²⁸ and SCLC's President concurred, explaining that he was relying on faith and goodwill to make the movement work. As Abernathy explains,

We estimated the Poor People's March would cost around one million dollars, a huge fortune in 1968. We had collected about three hundred thousand dollars, which we figured would be enough to put us on the road and get us to Washington. After that, we would have to rely on the grace of God and the generosity of Americans, black and white. Thus far our contributions had ranged from an anonymous gift of twenty-five thousand dollars to thirty-seven cents, given by a poor black who had come to our headquarters, eager to help but a little strapped for cash.²⁹

While people from all backgrounds and economic statuses contributed to the campaign, SCLC staff failed to raise sufficient funds to ensure a comfortable atmosphere.

The architects relied on the Procurement Committee to acquire all of the many necessary materials, including lumber, canvas, plastic sheet rolls, rope, clothes line, hardware, electrical goods, plumbing and fixtures, tools of all kinds, doors, garden hoses, paint, basic furniture, and bedding.³⁰ SCLC hoped the City would be built with donated goods, but the only donation of any consequence was 300 gallons of paint. PPC organizers reminded contributors that even small donations would go a long way, estimating that five dollars would buy plywood and some nails, ten would buy shower fixtures, twenty would buy a telephone pole, sixty dollars would provide shelter for six people, and an \$800 donation could fund an entire neighborhood in the temporary city. Since PPC leaders still had not been announced the City's location, volunteers were instructed to bring all donations directly to the building site. While donated good were

²⁸ *The New York Times*, May 13, 1968.

²⁹ Abernathy, 505.

³⁰ Materials Needed By the Shelters Committee, KL, SCLC, 178:30.

lacking, the number of volunteers exceeded all expectations because a number of local church and neighborhood groups were excited to help build.³¹

One of the biggest problems, according to Henry, was that SCLC's mobilization staff was over anxious about whether or not people would actually show up, so they over-recruited. The increased popularity of the PPC in the wake of King's assassination further exacerbated this problem. The staff was simply unequipped to negotiate such large crowds arriving so quickly, with two big waves arriving within days of each other.³² Fortunately, SCLC received several cars that SCLC staff and a Pontiac dealership had donated for use during the PPC to transport participants to alternate housing locations or in case of emergency to the hospital or back from jail.³³

Once PPC leaders decided to determine the location and negotiate terms ahead of time, although behind closed doors, there was no practical reason why the Building and Structures Committee³⁴ could not install the utilities and administrative facilities before building the participants' tents. But apparently image outweighed practicality and the needs of the participants in the grandiose minds of some leaders. Henry explains that he urged Abernathy to install the sewer lines and plumbing and "perhaps not put anything above ground that could be seen and it would give the impression of him beginning the construction" but insists that Abernathy would not concede because "he wanted to be the first man to drive the stake and wanted nothing done to the land before he did that and

³¹ Flyer for the New City of Hope, KL, SCLC, 178:30.

³² Anthony Henry Interview.

³³ Cars Contributed KL, SCLC, 177:15.

³⁴ Now that site had been determined, the name was changed to the Building and Structures Committee.

wanted the people to move in immediately afterwards.”³⁵ Apparently portraying himself as the new leader outweighed the needs of the participants.

Resistance to the plan within SCLC’s ranks also contributed to indecision regarding the site and structure of the City. Henry explains that at a planning session in New York City it became apparent that both Hosea Williams and William Rutherford never intended to have the camp be the focus. For them, the City was, as Henry describes it,

. . . merely a way of beginning with a confrontation with the Government . . . you’re to go up, march up to a certain point, try to set up a city. If they let you set it up, fine; and if they didn’t that was all right, too, because then you would have engaged in your confrontation.³⁶

Some took the approach that it was acceptable to have inadequate services because the point was to demonstrate how bad conditions were for the poor. Other options discussed were to have a smaller building where people would live, somewhere in the center of the city, and have others conducting protests at government buildings, scattered throughout the Washington.³⁷ But SCLC’s new leader hoped to build a City on a Hill and to be seen as the primary architect of this ideal society.

BUILDING RESURRECTION CITY

After a Mother’s Day march on Sunday May 12 kicked off the Washington stage of the PPC, the following day residents would begin to move in to their new homes. In a matter of days, volunteers worked to create a city of small, wooden, A-frame houses for the approaching participants. On May 13, after singing a round of “We Shall

³⁵ Anthony Henry Interview.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Anthony Henry Interview.

Overcome,” Abernathy turned to an American Indian girl and asked her permission to use the land that her people had originally owned. While many Americans considered the space on the National Mall sacred due to its patriotic memorials and its symbolic location as a truly national space, PPC leaders sought permission from American Indians throughout the campaign, in addition to obtaining a permit from the Park Service. Throughout the PPC’s existence, Abernathy and other PPC leaders strove to keep the fragile multiracial coalition united, and one way to do this was to honor the history and contributions of each ethno-racial group that joined the movement. After this girl granted him permission, Abernathy pounded a stake into the ground, declaring the space to be “our new city of hope, Resurrection City, USA.”³⁸

The crowd of approximately three hundred enjoyed a forty-five minute ceremony, after which the “foremen,” who the yard supervisor had just trained, helped volunteers and those participants who had already arrived build their homes with the prefabricated components. Campaign officials expected to have two hundred tents built by the next day, while participants who had already arrived stayed in six local hospitality tents.³⁹ The first home was built for Minnie Lee Hill from Marks, Mississippi, who was emblematic of many of the PPC’s participants. Abernathy recounts, “Mrs. Hill was there with eight of her children and she symbolized the need and deprivation that Martin had recognized and responded to in that community.” Abernathy bragged that, “Washingtonians were surprised (and probably shocked) to see about six city blocks of

³⁸ Abernathy, 512.

³⁹ Daily Summary, May 13, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark’s Papers, LBJ Library.

raw plywood structures covering the green lawn of the Mall. We had moved in.”⁴⁰

While SCLC tried to present the City in a positive light, both the press and the government seemed either suspicious or resentful of the very presence of Resurrection City.⁴¹

The government kept a minute-by-minute account of everything that occurred in Resurrection City. They also documented many events that did not actually occur but were simply rumors. On May 13, the Attorney General’s office reported that the average age of participants was eighteen and indicated that there were rumors of one of the temporary shelters having “a strong smell of alcohol.” The government sources also warned that many of the teenagers were determined to live elsewhere in the D.C. area rather than remain in Resurrection City. The appearance of Stokely Carmichael in the City on its first day of existence warranted mention, as well as the fact that James Bevel, who had apparently invited Carmichael, declared the black power advocate ““a friend of ours”” who ““ will always be welcome at Resurrection City.””⁴² While the government was surveying the scene for possible problems, the participants were hard at work building their city.

SCLC staff member Bernard Lafayette was responsible for coordinating the construction of Resurrection City, with the assistance of Wiebenson and the Building and Structures Committee. The job of assembling the prefabricated parts went to young strapping men, primarily from the South who had arrived the first caravan, the Freedom Train. Newbern Rooks, a community college student at the time who had joined with

⁴⁰ Abernathy, 512-513.

⁴¹ See chapter eight for more on the press and government’s treatment of the PPC.

other young men to build Resurrection City, explained that in the beginning food was somewhat scarce since there were many more people than had been expected.⁴³ Booker Wright, Jr. concurs, explaining that when they arrived they were “instructed to stay in tents” and volunteers fed them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.⁴⁴ Despite the undesirable food and accommodations, most of the young men were excited to be there and see what transpired. Another young man who helped build Resurrection City, George Davis, who was only fourteen or fifteen years old at the time, remembered the exhilaration of just being in Washington having never traveled far from home.⁴⁵ Even the A-frame shacks were new to participants. Bertha Burres Johnson reflects, “It was exciting. That was the first time I’d ever seen shanties made out of plywood. That’s why they called them shanties instead of tents.”⁴⁶ Newbern Rooks recounted the thrill of meeting civil rights legend Rosa Parks at the opening celebration and being on the National Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial.

Several of the early arrivals had significant encounters with Washington residents, many of which housed the participants while they built Resurrection City. Newbern Rooks recounts how excited he was when a motorcycle gang from Philly known as the Wheels of Soul took him and other young black men who had helped build Resurrection City on a tour of D.C. and provided them with a place to sleep.⁴⁷ Others had similar experiences with Washington residents. Booker Wright, Jr. recounts how D.C. residents

⁴² Daily Summary, May 13, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark’s Papers, LBJ Library.

⁴³ Newbern Rooks Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Memphis, Tennessee, September 1, 2006.

⁴⁴ Booker Wright, Jr. Interview

⁴⁵ George Davis, Interviewed by Amy Nathan Wright, Marks, Mississippi, September 2, 2006.

⁴⁶ Bertha Burres Johnson Interviewed with Author.

“just took us around and they treated us really nice. This guy James Reeb; he was a white guy. He took us into his home and fed us. He was just amazing.” Wright remembers that when he and some other young men first met Reeb at the Washington Monument “We were skeptical at first, but there was no holes in it, he was just real nice.” Wright recounts that even after Resurrection City was fully constructed Reeb would visit the group of boys there and insists that this type of encounter was quite common, “The residents of D.C. came by Resurrection City everyday and took people out.” Wright remembers how a woman named Carolyn Coleman taught him to play ping-pong and how to swim at a local YMCA and how on a regular basis, “Residents would bring you food, clothing, even give you money!”⁴⁸ While Wright and Rooks both enjoyed their day in the city, Rooks paints a very different picture of D.C. residents. He recounts that those he encountered were “rude” and resistant to the PPC, explaining that many local people saw the PPC as an invasion of their city and did not want to have anything to do with it.⁴⁹

Anthony Henry recounts that the GSA, particularly Albert Gollin, had established a detailed and practical plan of how to receive arriving participants and direct them to a spot where they could build their tents. According to Henry, the initial group of participants “had very high spirits and went right to work building their shanties and set some kind of records; several hundreds shanties a day.”⁵⁰ During the first couple of weeks when construction was in full-force, the Building and Structures Committee had one member on-site at almost all times to help supervise and attend to any difficulties that

⁴⁷ Newbern Rooks Interview.

⁴⁸ Booker Wright, Jr. Interview.

⁴⁹ Newbern Rooks Interview.

⁵⁰ Anthony Henry Interview.

arose. Wiebenson recounts how building the A-frame huts fostered community and accelerated the pace of construction:

Most builders increased their efficiency by forming into teams to accomplish a specific task: there were floor –and-frame teams, skylight teams, and door teams . . . Helping with construction made it possible for members of the committee to see how people could build their own shelters with enthusiasm and pride. Some, usually those from the rural South, built slowly and individually; those from large cities seemed to have more experience in working together, and they built rapidly in teams. The New York crowd, for example, was able to put up shelters at a rate of about one unit per fifteen minutes per three-man team.⁵¹

He describes the efforts of two teenage boys who were so proud of their structures that they brought people over to admire their craft: “They showed off the small windows they had made near the bunks they had built-in. They spoke with pride and enthusiasm.” It was not only the young who built; Wiebenson also witnessed “two old men who pounded nails with rocks because of the shortage of hammers. They worked slowly but purposefully, enjoying their many conferences on what should be the next step.” The participants were generous, sharing their knowledge, skills, and efforts. Wiebenson recounts that a second group of boys built a unit and gave it to relatives after building an additional structure on top of the original hut.⁵²

The rate of building varied among different populations. At the peak of its development, the City’s architect characterized his creation as “a demonstration of people building for themselves with enthusiasm and pride” and a “useful model of the community development process in action.” Resurrection City was not only an ingenious display of poverty; Wiebenson saw it as an opportunity to promote community construction of permanent low income housing wherever needed:

⁵¹ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 407.

If people can so easily be helped to build their own shelters, then it would seem easy to develop construction systems that go beyond current 'self-help' programs to permit people to build their own housing. 'Kits' of materials and simple directions could solve many building problems, even in our inner cities.⁵³

While construction was underway, residents made many decisions for themselves, in large because SCLC leadership was incapable of seeing through with all of their plans. For instance, leaders' and group storage shacks were never formally constructed, but many cohesive housing units built their own.

Some of the more self-sufficient groups received criticism for acting independently, since some even had their own marshals and did their own cooking, but these groups modeled what community-control and self-determination were all about. Wiebenson admired the New York group and recounts how "on the first Sunday after Resurrection City's occupation (a chaotic day when nearly 1,000 people arrived in the first of the rain), some of the New York crowd carried plywood on their cars, delivering it where people needed it to build." The New York group was one of the most cohesive, and Wiebenson suggests that as time passed these groups became increasingly isolated from the larger group, insisting that "some even retreated behind guarded fences. But, this is how they had survived at home, and as problems in the City grew, it was one way to survive here."⁵⁴ Unlike the most cohesive group from New York, Wiebenson explains that white Appalachians built "neither near nor far from others. They usually started to build independently, but if advised to work with others because impending rain or darkness suggested a need for greater efficiency and speed, they were agreeable to doing

⁵² Wiebenson, "An Outline of Resurrection City As Used," 16.

⁵³ Wiebenson, "Planner's Notebook," 410.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 408-409.

so.”⁵⁵ Individuals and small groups made improvements of their own, and local volunteers gave countless hours to erecting the city. For instance, a group of local electricians took a leave of absences to work for weeks with no pay wiring the City; a D.C. church group donated the materials and labor to build the daycare center, while a local skilled carpenter stopped by on a regular basis to assist with any problems. While SCLC attempted to run a national and local grassroots movement simultaneously, the PPC’s leadership organized most events and made the vast majority of decisions. The resident’s homes were one area that they had control over, and building gave many a sense of purpose and stability.⁵⁶

From the beginning the city was in disarray, and it remained that way throughout its existence. SCLC leaders were not equipped to run simultaneously a functioning city and carry on daily, and sometimes nightly, protests throughout the nation’s capital. They had a lack of funds and resources and were dealing with a population with problems of their own. While Resurrection City began as a thriving community,⁵⁷ and PPC leaders

⁵⁵ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. Wiebenson characterizes the PPC’s stay in Washington in three stages: High Growth (1st and 2nd weeks), High Occupation (2nd and 3rd weeks) and Low Occupation (4th, 5th, and 6th weeks). He explains that these periods were overlapping and could as easily be divided and described in alternate ways. For instance, a resident who stayed for only the first two weeks might identify two periods—wet and dry. Long-term residents might characterize the time based on services provided, “Chaotic Start, Constant Change, and Near Routine,” but Wiebenson insists that these designations would correspond temporally with his divisions. He illustrates further: “The change in activities was basically a shift from those structured by the individual or others to activities not structured at all . . . The activities structured by an individual for himself fell off when the amount of building fell off, for new opportunities did not appear. Activities structured by an individual for others did not decline as much because of continuing need. For similar reasons, those structured by others for others did not appear to decline at all.

⁵⁷ Wiebenson argues that, as problems grew, “building came to a halt, and people withdrew from community. Soon, qualities making this a special city disappeared . . . Resurrection City became more a demonstration of conditions that exist rather than those that could be.” See Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 411.

planned the city at every level, SCLC did not have the time or funds to ensure that all of the participants had everything they needed. Yet, for many, the conditions in Resurrection City were better than life at home. One middle-aged black woman declared, “I’m doing much better than I was doing in Mississippi and I’m going to stay here if it’s His will until I receive what I came for.”⁵⁸

CITY STRUCTURE & SYSTEMS

The Building and Structures Committee, which was responsible for designing and overseeing construction of all other services provided in the City, planned the City at every scale to meet the diverse needs of the participants and prepare for the various activities they would participate in during their stay in the City. The Committee considered the fact that this city’s population was not a community but an amalgamation of poor people from different political, geographic, and ethno-racial backgrounds. Wiebenson explains how the Committee planned the City around this population, its location, and the unique circumstances of their stay:

They were coming from diverse backgrounds to dwell, briefly, in a community imbedded in what would be for them an alien environment. Therefore, we felt they would need the City’s formal and programmatic framework to be both complete and explicit. This framework would have to respond to a wide variety of needs, as the residents would require not only arrangements for security and health but also conditions that facilitated neighborly relationships. Since we assumed that a resident’s ‘day’ would be devoted not only to eating, sleeping, and demonstrating, structures to house informal activities would also be needed. Finally, we assumed that three-quarters of the residents would be single, and the others would be in families that might include children.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Anonymous black woman, quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., “The Promised Land 1967-1968,” *Eyes on the Prize II Part 4* (Alexandria, VA: Blackside Productions, 1990).

⁵⁹ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 16.

Along with the construction of the A-frame tents that would serve as houses for the arriving participants, the Committee planned all the communal buildings and the layout for the city's structure. Abernathy recounts that in addition to installing phone lines, which AT&T donated, the teams of volunteers had to put in "temporary sewer lines, showers, electrical wiring, and medical supplies. The cost for these preliminary 'hook-ups' ran around thirty-nine thousand dollars—a fairly expensive camping trip."⁶⁰

The first order of business was planning communities within the City. Small units of nine or so shelters formed a compound that backed to a shower and set of toilets. Each community, groups of four compounds, had a leader's shack for group storage and supplies. PPC staff provided central storage facilities at the Community 1 Center, which was staffed twenty-four hours a day, housed the lost and found, and provided bedding and linen, maintenance tools, cleaning supplies, and other necessary supplies, such as sanitary napkins, tampons, contraceptives, and baby supplies. Each block would receive clean linens on a four-day cycle, and clothing and toilet articles such as soap, razor blades, shaving cream, shampoo were made available in each Community Center. Personal laundry had to be marked with a laundry pencil and dropped off at the neighborhood supply center where it would be organized and sent off to a local laundry and then redistributed to each center.⁶¹

PPC leaders planned to have a Maintenance System to perform specialized maintenance and general upkeep of all physical structures and maintenance of all the city's tools and equipment. Residents would assist the full-time Director and Deputy

⁶⁰ Abernathy, 506.

Director with two working leaders and six workers from each block who would be responsible for general maintenance for their areas. While participants were responsible for their own shelters, which had heavy paper sacks to hold trash, PRIDE, INC. volunteered to handle daily trash collection and garbage removal, but community leaders would be responsible for taking the metal garbage cans to a central location for collection. The Director for Cleaning Buildings would have a staff of six participants from each community who would assume responsibility for cleaning all community buildings, dining halls, and other facilities. Each community's sanitation facilities were to be mopped and cleaned with disinfectant each morning or early afternoon.⁶²

SCLC intended to make communication between PPC leadership and participants as quick and clear as possible. They arranged to have "one man from each community" [pick up schedules each morning at 6:00 a.m. and post copies at each of the supply centers, the dining hall, and other prominent locations along the main thoroughfare, Main Street.⁶³ The PPC's leadership planned for participants to have a fairly regimented schedule during their stay in Resurrection City. Each morning from 6:30 to 7:00 there would be a worship service followed by breakfast, which was served between 7:00 and 9:00. After breakfast, adults and youth were supposed to attend training sessions at the Poor People's University, with lunch to follow, served from noon to 2:00. Participants were given an hour and a half "siesta" followed by another round of classes. Supper was

⁶¹ KL, SCLC, 178:26.

⁶² Maintenance and Sanitation, KL, SCLC, 178:26.

⁶³ Information System, KL, SCLC, 178:26.

served from 5:00 to 7:00 followed by a two hour mass meeting, and lights were supposed to be out by 11:00.⁶⁴

The city provided pay phones established along Main Street as well phones at the dining hall, the childcare center, and the recreation center, and an intercom system that was connected through the Supply Information Center. Wiebenson suggests that, “Most communication between individuals was face-to-face, and this often required considerable searching for the right individual,” and claims that this “limited the usefulness of telephones to their headquarters or motel.”⁶⁵ Wiebenson notes that in-group communication typically occurred through meetings, but insists that, “scale prevented City meetings from being more than one-way.” He explains that the main source of communication was newspapers and notices, which SCLC “used to speak to the whole City, but these had a time lag, and as few events were planned before they occurred,” which meant that “printed matter was generally about the past or general future.” The other form of communication was a PA system, but Wiebenson explains that “continuous use caused them to be resented or not heard,” and residents towards the west end of the encampment felt separated because they could not even hear the announcements.⁶⁶ Residents were able to communicate with the outside world with the telephones and through the U.S. mail. They received mail Monday through Saturday with the assistance of two volunteers who would take a station wagon over to the Main Post Office by Union Station where the PPC had a mailbox for Resurrection City. In addition, a camp post

⁶⁴ Outline for Poor People’s Campaign structure and schedule, KL, SCLC, 49:5.

⁶⁵ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

office was located in the City Control building where residents could access standard postal services and pick up their mail.⁶⁷

The Committee was never able to rectify some structural problems; for example, the City lacked proper drainage systems for baths and showers, so participants had to be bussed to baths on a semi-daily basis.⁶⁸ Yet residents did not seem to mind too much.

Milton Garrett recounts

It really was like camping out . . . They did a good job while we were up there. They provided running water. We were able to brush our teeth and wash our face. They provided us with food. It was an experience at seventeen years old having never been away from home. The more I think about it, it was alright.⁶⁹

Andrew Young remembers that within a week Resurrection City was “a good-size town with a legion of logistical problems,” insisting that there were “simply too many people—almost seven thousand at our peak in June. And the larger the population, the greater the problems.” Rather than being the City on the Hill that Abernathy and others had imagined, Young explains that within a few weeks Resurrection City quickly became “almost a microcosm of an overcrowded big-city ghetto. Our staff became weighed down by the problems of housing, feeding, and governing.”⁷⁰ SCLC staff was overwhelmed by the logistics of running a national protest movement and a city simultaneously. One of SCLC’s biggest mistakes was their failure to entrust the City’s management to its residents, despite the organization’s efforts to establish local representation and community control.

⁶⁷ Information System, KL, SCLC, 178:26.

⁶⁸ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 407.

⁶⁹ Milton Garrett Interview.

⁷⁰ Young, 481-482.

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION

The population in Resurrection City was extremely diverse and fluid throughout its existence. Wiebenson summarizes the cast of characters that displayed their poverty upon the stage of Resurrection City, as follows:

Residents were recruited from all over the country, but mostly from the rural South and large cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Most of the white came from the Appalachian highlands. They were all ages, but mostly they were young. There were Indians, whites, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican-Americans among them, but most were blacks. Nobody knew how many would come, and estimates varied between 3,000 and 5,000, once getting as high as 15,000. Actually, the City was to hold about 2,800, primarily because the Mexican-Americans never lived there.⁷¹

Tijerina heard there was no room for the group in Resurrection City, so he made alternative plans for the Chicano groups, La Alianza and the Crusade for Justice. The Chicano leader explains,

We were there a week before I chose Hawthorne School to house our people. Rodolfo ‘Corky’ Gonzales from Denver, Reverend Nieto from Austin, Texas, two young Puerto Ricans from New York, and a young woman, Escalante, from Los Angeles, assisted me in the school. We were more than five hundred strong, brave people from the entire Southwest.⁷²

Paul and Violet Orr, the founders of the Hawthorne School, offered their campus to the Mexican American and American Indian contingents to express their appreciation for the kindness they experienced from these groups when they ran a school in Taos, New Mexico. The school was not meant to house people, but the Orrs had installed a new electric stove and had converted the gym into a dorm for men and the library into a dorm for women. Some Chicanos and American Indians eventually built huts in Resurrection

⁷¹ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 406.

City, but the majority remained at the school, in part because of the poor conditions and overcrowding in Resurrection City.⁷³

During the first two weeks of its existence, around 3,000 people lived in Resurrection City with hundreds more in temporary housing. The City was divided into three communities of 1,000 participants in each community. Each community consisted of four neighborhoods of approximately 250 people, with each neighborhood divided into blocks of around sixty people. Every community had its own information and supply center and leadership.⁷⁴ Campaign leaders had high expectations and goals equal community representation for each different group participating in the PPC. Along with citywide representatives and the security force—the marshals—PPC organizers planned to have representation for smaller city units. The head of each household would serve as the representative for each tent and would be responsible for reporting any problems and ensuring the tent and surrounding areas remained clean and free of problems.⁷⁵

While the PPC’s leadership made participant representation in decision-making a stated goal, they differed concerning the extent to which participants actually directed the city’s functions and led daily protests. For instance, Abernathy recounts that “after much thought” the Town Council “was appointed rather than elected, since no one knew anyone else well enough to vote with any degree of authority,” but attempted to represent “all the various ‘neighborhoods,’” insisting that, “in general the council worked

⁷² Reies Lopez Tijerina, *They Called Me “King Tiger”: My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights*, Translated from the Spanish and edited by Jose Angel Gutierrez (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2000), 106.

⁷³ Patricia Bell Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants: Mexican Americans in Struggle for Their Heritage* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 125.

⁷⁴ Administrative Units of Resurrection City, KL, SCLC, 178:26.

effectively together. They made decisions to keep peace and order in the city, and established rules to govern the conduct of such communal activities as the mess tent.”⁷⁶ While participants often made decisions, there was no clear structure for community representation and grassroots leadership. Anthony Henry claims that the creation of community representation was a response to critiques from people in Washington that the PPC was being “organized and controlled by white people on behalf of minority groups that were primarily nonwhite to be participating in the campaign.” He suggests that the solution was not to eliminate white committee chairs but to form “a super structure on top of it which was a group of coordinators who each had from three to eight committees working under them that they were to maintain and communicate with.”⁷⁷ Wiebenson proposes that the city failed to function smoothly due in large to its “amorphous political structure.” He asserts that although town meetings were held and efforts made to form a City Council, these attempts were simply forums for the poor, not decision-making bodies, indicating that only SCLC leaders made major decisions, and most of them were rarely actually in Resurrection City since they were staying at the nearby Pitts Motel.

Another major problem with the leadership and administration was that the City Manager who was responsible for coordinating the services and activities within Resurrection City was also the Demonstration Leader, which meant no one was on site to handle problems or even daily maintenance. The role of City Manager also had a constantly revolving cast of SCLC characters.⁷⁸ As Andrew Young explains,

⁷⁵ Draft, Community Representation of Resurrection City, KL, SCLC, 177:15.

⁷⁶ Abernathy, 521.

⁷⁷ Anthony Henry Interview.

⁷⁸ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 409.

There was a power struggle between Jim Bevel and Ralph: they both wanted to be ‘mayor’ of Resurrection City. The mayor held a press briefing every day, which made the title so attractive, I suppose. The entire business was so absurd . . . I had no patience with the kind of insecurity that led people to fight over titles when there was work to be done. So since Ralph was president of SCLC he declared himself mayor. But he wasn’t there on a daily basis to deal with problems. There were conflicts in the tent city that required regular mediation, but Ralph was primarily interested in ceremonial functions of the mayor, such as baptizing a baby born in Resurrection City and holding press conferences.⁷⁹

While SCLC’s top leadership argued amongst themselves in King’s absence, no one played the role of emissary between the D.C. staff and SCLC’s national leadership.

Anthony Henry explains how the different levels of leadership conflicted as the D.C. based staff confronted the incoming SCLC leaders, who only sporadically appeared in Washington until they arrived with their various caravans. For instance, Henry recounts that when the Southern Caravan arrived, its leaders, Rev. James Bevel and Rev. Al Sampson, “didn’t have any real plans on what should be done” but insisted on being in charge. Henry explains Bert Ransom, the City Manager D.C. staff had appointed, “found himself constantly in conflict with them on how to proceed.” According to Henry, Bevel and Sampson “disagreed with the theory of democratic participation of decision-making in that camp. Bevel stated that this camp was going to be a theocracy run by the preachers; and Sampson, of course, used ‘the slave don’t make decisions.’” Henry explained further that this type of encounter was typical of SCLC’s leadership style: “formal lines of authority and informal lines of authority within SCLC are frequently in conflict with each other, and so you end up with no lines of authority and informal lines of authority or too many.” Henry defined SCLC as functioning informally like a “new left organization,” one that “operates on what they feel ought to be done as opposed to

⁷⁹ Young, 482.

someone giving authoritarian directions,” but which formally “counts on giving people titles that don’t mean much.”⁸⁰ Like many other civil rights efforts, some of the high profile leaders were interested in getting their names in the press, while everyday people—in this case the residents, volunteers, and lower level PPC staff—did the majority of the actual work movements require.

Wiebenson adds that SCLC leaders’ physical location during the day in Resurrection City and at the Pitts Motel at night reflected the gap between the campaign’s leadership and the participants:

The dwelling compound built for Campaign leaders in the public way was of units so tightly clustered as to suggest not only difficulty of entry, but withdrawal from the rest of the community, as well. The central location did not lessen the symbol of withdrawal, but rather made it and the long vacancy of the compound apparently important.⁸¹

SCLC’s leadership was unaccustomed to dealing with people day in and day out and retreated either to their hotel rooms or their leadership hut rather than really mixing with the people.

It is impossible to know how different the PPC might have been had Dr. King survived to see his vision through, but participants continue to associate the PPC, both its successes and its failures, with Dr. King. Augusta Denson remembers the PPC’s leaders fondly,

They was good organizers. Everything Dr. Martin Luther King worked for, it was worth it. It brought a lot of people together that weren’t together. There was a lot of hatred between us, and that dissipated. Hosea Williams did a good job.⁸²

⁸⁰ Anthony Henry Interview.

⁸¹ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 11.

⁸² Augusta Denson Interview.

But others felt let down by SCLC's leaders. Booker Wright, Jr. recalls that many of "the promises that they made wasn't always accurate" and how participants felt a sense of betrayal when they heard rumors that SCLC leaders were staying at the Pitts Motel: "you never did actually see the top leaders, so they had to be staying somewhere, but they weren't living there in the mud and rain with us."⁸³ Having heard stories of King visiting poor people's homes in his home town of Marks, Mississippi, Wright believed that the absent leader would have been down in the mud with them. He proposed that other SCLC leaders were simply not of the same character as Dr. King, and his death signaled the end of the movement:

My personal opinion, deep down in my heart, I believe that Dr. King, when he died, the dream died. You didn't get that honesty out of people like Dr. King could. Rev. Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, so and so on, to me, they didn't carry it on in the same respect as Dr. King would. I believe that today, if he could come back and see what he died for he would be very disappointed.⁸⁴

Wright is not the only one who missed Dr. King's presence and felt that the PPC would have been stronger had he survived to see it through. James Figgs, another Marks resident, recounts that when he arrived in Resurrection City, "quite frankly we were scared as hell. Being in Washington, DC and being out on the U.S. government turf, you couldn't help but thing that if something happened, Dr. King is not here."⁸⁵ While one individual could not have served as a security force for an entire city, King did know how to sway the masses to follow his moral path of non-violence. In his absence, the movement struggled to censor violent and destructive forces.

⁸³ Booker Wright, Jr. Interview.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

SECURITY: THE MARSHALS

PPC leadership planned to have a round the clock block patrol that watched for outsiders not authorized to be in the city, prevent vandalism and theft, and prevent any trouble that may develop. The security force would also serve as the fire department for the city and would be trained to use fire extinguishers and the fire alarm system. In addition to community and block patrols, a general security force would man stations at all entrances to the city, as well as supervising all community functions and special events. SCLC insisted that the participants would determine the regulations of the city but the security force would be responsible for enforcing those rules and regulations. PPC leaders demanded that the marshals “must not take on the characteristics of policemen imposing power indiscriminately on its people—but rather must derive its authority from the people as their representatives.” Anyone caught breaking a city rule was supposed to be brought to the Community Director of Security who would determine whether to turn the individual over to District of Columbia Police, handle the problem on site, or send the participant home.

The marshals were responsible for enforcing a number of rules, some of which intruded into the personal lives of participants. SCLC outlined the marshals duties, which included directing children and elderly participants to their tents, making sure that single males and females were not sleeping in the same quarters, keeping all alcohol and fire arms off site, awakening participants for breakfast, as well as maintaining basic

⁸⁵ James Figgs, Marks resident, quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., “The Promised Land 1967-1968,” *Eyes on the Prize II Part 4* (Alexandria, VA: Blackside Productions, 1990).

facilities and trash.⁸⁶ Many of these duties gave the marshals the potential to act in an authoritarian manner, which a considerable number of participants might have resented since the majority of marshals were young, brash, men, just barely out of their teens.

Cornelius Givens, SCLC's New York Coordinator explains:

I think the biggest problems encountered would be problems from the marshals, from other 'gangs,' or other marshals from other parts of Resurrection City disrupting people, disturbing people, shining their lights into people's shanties, just annoying people, period. That's one. And, I think the other major problem with the marshals was that they were immature, and didn't have any direction, and often times, they'd create situations that would send five or ten marshals on a rampage, running through Resurrection City screaming and shouting that someone's jumped the fence. That's absurd. Who the hell's going to jump the goddamn fence coming into Resurrection City? . . . I bought many bus tickets and shipped people out; people for insubordination, people for getting drunk, or people for getting drunk and messing with women, or people for stealing. We'd just pack them up and send them home.⁸⁷

Henry insists that the problem was that too many of the marshals were too young and immature for this level of responsibility and had "very little understanding of nonviolence, little or no point to it."⁸⁸

Before joining the security force, marshals, as the guards were known, had to sign a pledge. They swore the following:

" . . . to protect and guide participants; to safeguard lives and property; to maintain order and discipline; to inspire strength and confidence in peaceful non-violent action against oppression and intimidation; and to respect the Constitutional rights of all men."⁸⁹

The marshals also had to promise to keep their "private life unsullied as an example to all" and "maintain courageous calm in the face of danger, scorn, or ridicule." Yet, the

⁸⁶ "Preliminary Outline for Marshals," David Morris Collection, Box 5, Folder 13, Archives of the Appalachias, East Tennessee University.

⁸⁷ Cornelius Givens Interview.

⁸⁸ Anthony Henry Interview.

marshals often ended up being the ones to incite danger, scorn, and ridicule rather than resist them. Rather than a position of authority, SCLC insisted that the marshals pledge that their office was “a symbol of public faith” to be held only so long as they were “true to the ethics of the non-violent movement.”⁹⁰ Unfortunately, many of the young men appointed as marshals had little or no training in non-violent philosophy and tactics and tended to be more radical in their politics and militant in their tactics than most participants and organizers. Journalist Ben W. Gilbert reports that many of these young men “had been deliberately recruited by the SCLC from city streets, to include the toughest street gangs of the nation in a bold experiment.” The “gangs” included Chicago’s Blackstone Rangers, the Milwaukee Commandos, the Memphis Invaders, and other local groups that competed once on a national stage. Gilbert recounts that the marshals were under supervision of Rev. James Orange, described as “an enormous bearded Negro who always wore bob overalls” and Alfred Spencer, “a muscular black man with a swift military stride, who wore dark glasses rain or shine.” The two top marshals met repeatedly with Nash Castor, National Park Service Director, who, according to Gilbert, “pleaded with them to restore order.” But the youth in the camp were increasingly bored, when according to Gilbert, the daily protests “became sporadic and disorganized.”⁹¹ While Gilbert attributes the violence and mayhem to SCLC’s poor planning, others place blame elsewhere.

Abernathy maintained that problems first arose when black youth from Chicago and Detroit started causing trouble. The PPC’s leader describes how the youth

⁸⁹ Security System and Poor People’s Campaign Marshall’s Pledge, KL, SCLC, 178:26.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

“attempted to behave in the same way they behaved on the streets of these troubled cities. They organized into an angry gang, swaggered around the city, drinking, cursing, and set up a ‘protection’ business.” He recounts that he thought the only solution was “to use psychology” and appoint “a few of the leaders ‘marshals,’” explaining that, “the only people who really needed disciplining were their own ranks. But the stratagem didn’t work.” Despite SCLC’s efforts to weed out the troublemakers and send them home, they were unable to identify them all, and some “made trouble until the day we left.”⁹² While violence undoubtedly occurred in Resurrection City, Andrew Young and historian Gerald D. McKnight both suggest that rather than the marshals inciting violence and mayhem, the government had planted infiltrators to cause problems. It is likely that both perspectives have a degree of accuracy.

The marshals were plagued with in-group fighting and tormented the media, a subject explored in more detail in chapter eight, so other groups formed to counter their authority and establish order in the City. A young bricklayer from Detroit, Johnny Patterson, decided to form his own group, the Tent City Rangers. This group was in their late-twenties and wore badges with what Gilbert described as “distinctive Australian-style campaign hats” and sharp “uniforms of blue denim or khaki” that Patterson acquired from donations. The Rangers were supposed to oversee the marshals and fill in holes in the security system, particularly transportation. Wiebenson explains that there was “more a sense of competition than cooperation between the Marshals and the Rangers” and there

⁹¹ Gilbert, *Ten Blocks from the White House*, 199-200.

⁹² Abernathy, 514-515.

were constant rumors that the Rangers would be disbanded, but the two groups tended to assist each other when crises emerged.⁹³

BOUNDARIES

The Marshals and the Tent City Rangers had quite a job just patrolling the border of the fifteen-acre plot. Since the federal Park Police could not enter the encampment, these men were responsible for the safety and wellbeing of the City's thousands of residents and everything that transpired in that space. Wiebenson describes the gaps in the snow fence circling the City:

The perimeter fence was both a real and symbolic barrier. To the north, west, and east, it was in clear view, and beyond it, curious outsiders and reporters could be seen. These sides were heavily guarded. However, to the south, the fence was obscured by dense woods. There were even some extensive gaps in the fence there, but with the woods as a strong visual barrier, guards seldom patrolled this side.⁹⁴

Along with providing a boundary for the city, the fence served a symbolic function that helped residents identify as part of the City. Residents could look across the fence and see a society to which they did not belong, experiencing what the City's architect characterized as "identity gained through exclusion, a kind of group self-awareness that was easy to develop, for he knew it at home."⁹⁵ While group awareness might have been experienced in relation to society at large, many residents constructed their own individual barriers, as well. Wiebenson recounts that, "there was, continuously, work being done to increase the inside/outside barrier through making entranceways and through changing canvas doors to wood; the private territory of the dwellings was

⁹³ Wiebenson, "An Outline of Resurrection City As Used," 6; Gilbert, 200.

strongly felt.” For instance a couple of reporters entrance into a shelter to photograph it caused “great anger.” Ultimately, Wiebenson determined that these boundaries were “based on fear,” but argued that this was the American way: “Fences and fear, withdrawal and despair describe ghetto, suburb, and downtown apartment building alike,” and Resurrection City quickly became “a demonstration model of the current American community.”⁹⁶ In Resurrection City poor people had the option, like the U.S. middle class and elite, to lock others out, an option they lacked at home where the local power structure severely limited poor people’s access to housing and services, as well as their mobility.

SELF-EXPRESSION & SELF-SEGREGATION

In addition to displaying their poverty to move the country’s conscience, Resurrection City provided its residents with an opportunity to communicate their individual ethnic, regional, religious, and cultural identity. The northern perimeter fence provided a communications and transportation gateway in and out of the City.

Wiebenson explains,

Passers-by would stop here to read the walls of several shelters that had been covered with enough slogans to turn them into billboards. Then, quite naturally, they would fall into conversation with residents standing within the fence.⁹⁷

The contact between the participants and Washington residents and tourists was precisely the point of the PPC—mutual understanding fostered through direct interaction. Many people identified themselves according to their geographical origins; for instance,

⁹⁴ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 409-410.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 9; “Planner’s Notebook,” 411.

⁹⁷ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 409-410.

Wiebenson recounts how Detroit citizens painted signs that said “Motown” on their shelters, and another was labeled “‘Cleveland’s Rat Patrol,’” but less organized neighborhoods had no signs, and the encampment as a whole never created a sign to mark its presence. Individuals made a range of adaptations to their huts, from painting their names or slogans on their walls, fashioning windows and doors, and even constructing sunroofs, at least until the rain came.⁹⁸ Participants also decorated their plywood huts with expressions of their identity politics, using slogans like “Black Power,” “Chicano Poor,” “Poor Power.”⁹⁹ Others were more individualistic. Abernathy recounts that there was one named “‘Big House of John Hickman.’” Another contained ‘Soul Sisters Shirley, Mary, Ruby, Joyce.’” Some were donned with Spanish names, and Abernathy insists that residents were allowed to write whatever they wanted on their huts, “as long as it wasn’t offensive or obscene.”¹⁰⁰ While the City was beset with problems throughout its existence, its architect recognized that residents were able to establish “a sense of place and participation seldom seen in slums of public housing” suggesting that, “others could benefit from similar opportunities to develop place, group, and individual identification.”¹⁰¹ While a sense of place and individual and group identification were important, Resurrection City also displayed some of the drawbacks of a strong sense of group identification.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 407, 409-410.

⁹⁹ “What Can You Do For Us?” *Newsweek*, June 3, 1968, 22-27.

¹⁰⁰ Abernathy, 513.

¹⁰¹ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 411.

SELF-SEGREGATION

Like most urban centers, this temporary city was multi-racial and isolated from mainstream society. As the poor people moved in, much to the dismay and chagrin of SCLC's organizers, they immediately began to self-segregate according to race, region, or other tangible markers of identity. While Abernathy hoped to build a City on the Hill, he ended up with an inner city within a troubled city with as many ethnic enclaves as New York or Chicago. The U.S. poor had a long history of being pitted against one another, and this was one of the first campaigns to bring them together. While Abernathy hope that SCLC would establish a "model for the rest of the nation to emulate. Everyone would live together in peace and mutual respect . . . Since everyone would be poor, there would be no greed or envy."¹⁰² But everyone was not equal within the PPC, and SCLC's middle class leadership dominated other minority groups and their leaders.

The Mexican American group was displeased with the conditions and plans for the camp and decided to stay at the more comfortable Hawthorne School. The American Indians also segregated themselves from the rest of the group and stayed at local churches or at the Hawthorne School.¹⁰³ Reies Tijerina, one of the most outspoken Chicano leaders, complained, "We haven't been sharing the real benefits of SCLC, that's what's been keeping us out of Resurrection City." Tijerina insisted that his group was not being treated the same as those in the City, demanding:

Lights are given to rangers and to security to use at night and we don't get anything. They are given two-way radios to operate and we don't get anything of that kind. They get new clothing and we don't get any of that kind, we get nothing but used clothing. The Negroes get special things in Resurrection City

¹⁰² Abernathy, 502.

¹⁰³ See Vigil, 56-57.

that we don't even share . . . Two days ago I tried to move into Resurrection City and I ran into trouble. Everybody wants me out of Resurrection City.¹⁰⁴

Tom Houck argues that one of SCLC's biggest mistakes was not finding one location that was big enough for everyone, suggesting, "Had we been able to put everybody into the city, we would have had a much more unified city and we could have began a lot more very dashing programs."¹⁰⁵ Instead, the PPC remained fractured throughout its existence.

While Tijerina complained that SCLC was ignoring his group's needs, residents in Resurrection City were jealous of many of the amenities available at the Hawthorne School. For instance, the School had hot showers available, as well as facilities to cook hot meals. Residents of Resurrection City only received one hot meal a day and had to be bused out for showers, while according to Ernest Austin, those at the Hawthorne School ate "three good meals a day . . . Eggs for breakfast and bacon."¹⁰⁶ Austin explains that when a group of white Appalachians arrived late to join the PPC, Resurrection City was already mired in mud, so the group chose to stay along with the others at the Hawthorne School and the School received criticism for splintering the movement:

Well, Hawthorne was accused, for instance, within the campaign because here you had very liberal, white middle class couple opening up a school, and they opened it up to two, strong, cultural groups: Mexican-Americans, and the Indians who were well disciplined within themselves, brought their family structures with them, and knew one another, another, had family ties and interrelated, and the same with the Appalachians that came in.

Austin insists that these groups remained at Hawthorne not because they were afraid to live in the mud or with blacks, but because they saw Resurrection City as "nothing but a

¹⁰⁴ Reies Tijerina Interviewed by James Mosby on June 12, 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Project, tape #194.

¹⁰⁵ Tom Houck Interview.

¹⁰⁶ Ernest Austin Interview.

city ghetto. In which you brought all the ghetto problems in. And none of them had been used to those problems.”¹⁰⁷ Tillie Walker explains that the American Indians were divided over whether to remain at the Hawthorne School or join the others in the encampment on the Mall, explaining that “we had people who really wanted to move down to Resurrection City and at times did, off and on. Everyone didn’t come. They would move back and forth.”¹⁰⁸

Yet even within the camp there were little villages of poor whites and blacks from different regions of the country.¹⁰⁹ Abernathy recounts another potentially explosive situation that resulted from cultural differences and a lack of knowledge and sensitivity to the different groups’ needs. When PPC organizers tried to assign a Mexican American family to a lot next door to a black family and across from a white couple they protested.

Abernathy explains:

Speaking in Spanish they protested, pointing back down the gravel path, greatly agitated. Someone came to get me at City Hall; and when I got there, a small crowd had already gathered, staring suspiciously at this confrontation between the poor family and the Resurrection City authorities. I could tell by looking into their eyes what they were thinking: ‘It’s started here as well. Nothing is really going to be different. They’ll push us around just the way the authorities have done everywhere else we’ve been.’ I knew this could be more than a mere misunderstanding. Indeed, it might turn into a nationally televised incident. So I was very anxious to reassure these people that we were going to help them, not tyrannize them.¹¹⁰

A young black woman who spoke Spanish served as an interpreter for the family and explained that they wanted to live next door to Mexican Americans they had seen the next row over. Abernathy asked the interpreter to tell the family “we’re all living

¹⁰⁷ Ernest Austin Interview.

¹⁰⁸ Tillie Walker Interview.

¹⁰⁹ “Fragmentation in Resurrection City” *Commonweal* (June 21, 1968): 397.

together as one people, that we don't assign anyone to separate neighborhoods according to race or national origin.'" The family continued to protest, speaking Spanish at what Abernathy declared was "an astonishing rate. It was difficult for me to believe anyone could understand what she was saying." The woman explained that they had three small children who spoke Spanish and needed to be around other families that spoke their language. Abernathy recounts how he agonized over the decision to let the family self-segregate with others of the same ethnicity:

We had agreed from the beginning that we were going to have a completely integrated society, that property assignments would be made according to time of arrival, and that no exceptions would be made. However, this was a problem I had not anticipated . . . I had made a significant concession, a compromise with the very idea of Resurrection City. Above all we wanted to have a society that was completely amalgamated—a genuine melting pot to prove to the nation and the world that it could be done. I had just permitted the first exception to that principle.¹¹¹

This family's complaint was one of many. Abernathy insists that it was not just the Mexican Americans but every group that "wanted to stay with its own kind, and when we tried to encourage complete integration, we met with resistance—first mild protests, then heated entreaties, and finally cold, stubborn intransigence." While the civil rights movement had led both local and national desegregation efforts, the PPC's participant, Abernathy remarked in dismay, "not only preferred to live in separate ethnic groups, they *insisted* on it."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Abernathy, 515.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 515-516.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Despite the physical segregation that occurred within the city, bonds had been formed along the caravan to D.C. and realizations were made due to the interracial nature of the campaign. Jesse Jackson commented that:

“In Resurrection City the poor whites began to see how they had been used as tools of the economic system to keep other minority groups in check . . . Their problems are basically the same as ours: a need for food, jobs, medicine, and schools. However, they were given police rights over ‘niggers,’ a plan which satisfies their sick egos but does not deal with any of their basic problems. It was our wallowing together in the mud of Resurrection City that we were allowed to hear, to feel and to see each other for the first time in our American experience.”¹¹³

SCLC leaders had little room to respond to the segregation though; they were staying at the Howard or the Pitts Motel, while their poor constituents were suffering under the heat and rain that plagued the camp throughout its existence.¹¹⁴

THE RAIN & THE MUD

Weeks of heavy rain left the entire camp a muddy pit. Andrew Young explains that the rains persistence further complicated matters, “the grounds of our city never had a chance to dry out because people continually trampled through them. The lovely green grass had become a sea of mud” that in some places went “up to your knees.”¹¹⁵ To make matters worse, there was no place to clean up and dry off other than the unheated A-frame shelters, and this particular May and June were especially cold in Washington. Abernathy explains that this was no one-day rain shower or a light daily afternoon rain:

It was one of the wettest springs in the history of the nation’s capital. Day after day, the gray skies poured water, huge sheets that swept across the Mall like the monsoons of India . . . after a week the green grass that had provided us with a

¹¹³ Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, “Resurrection City: The Dream . . . The Accomplishments,” *Ebony*, October 1968, 67.

¹¹⁴ See “Turmoil in Shantytown” *Time*, June 7, 1968, 28; Young, 482.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

natural carpeting sank under our feet into soft mud. You could emerge from your tent, take a couple of steps, and suddenly find yourself ankle deep in cold, brown slush. The gravel pathways, built for the steady traffic of tourists, held up better, at least for a while, but once you left the path to walk down one of our 'streets' you did so at your own peril.¹¹⁶

When Coretta Scott King and Juanita Abernathy visited Resurrection City, Abernathy had "two strong-backed young men who were willing to be human horses" carry the women from place to place.¹¹⁷ While participants wallowed in the mud, SCLC leaders stayed in the safe, warm, dry comfort of their hotel rooms. Yet, the participants tended to make the best of a bad situation. Yet the participants themselves did not seem to mind so much. Mrs. Lila Mae Brooks of Sunflower County, Mississippi stated, "We used to mud and us who have commodes are used to no sewers" and another woman from Detroit commented, "I appreciate the mud" . . . "It might help get some of this disease out."¹¹⁸ For many, the conditions in the temporary city far exceeded what they were used to at home.

But others were not prepared to cope with such harsh conditions. SCLC staff member Bernard S. Lee explains that once the rains came, some participants would say, "Well, I hadn't volunteered for this. This is not what I envisioned."¹¹⁹ SCLC's Executive Director, a staunch opponent to the PPC, described Resurrection City during the rain as being "as bad as any battlefield there could have been in any of the great wars with the foot soldiers slogging through the mud."¹²⁰ Booker Wright, Jr. compared the encampment to "people in San Francisco during the gold rush days, they had these little

¹¹⁶ Abernathy, 517.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Charlayne A. Hunter, "On the Case in Resurrection City," *Trans-action* (October 1968): 50.

¹¹⁹ Bernard S. Lee quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 476.

huts, and it was raining and muddy . . . We had those little ponchos we'd thrown on."¹²¹ Poor people had been despised throughout U.S. history and typically stereotyped as filthy human beings, so the image of mud-drenched poverty warriors had to have worsened perceptions of the PPC and its participants. Lee recounts how the constant rain led to other problems, illustrating that "the stench from the rain on the soil, which was fertilized, the fertilizer itself just created a terrible odor. So this compounded our problems."¹²² The scene at Resurrection City was chaotic and messy, and this image reinforced stereotypes of the poor and caused the media to focus more on the actions of the anti-poverty activists within their struggling city than on the issues related to combating their poverty. Despite the mud and disorder, the participants benefited from many social services and a sense of community the temporary shantytown fostered through its shared spaces and group activities.

MAIN STREET

Like other American cities, residential segregation was the norm in Resurrection City but its diverse residents came together in shared public spaces, like "Main Street." Wiebenson intended for this space to be the location of "all other services and to tie the diverse elements together, both functionally and symbolically," but limited funds forced the Committee to adapt their plans for the City's main thoroughfare:

Originally, we had hoped to find a construction system that would permit a kind of covered arcade for the main service spine. Such possibilities as telephone poles, with canvas for roof and partitions, considered. However, our assumptions of available construction skills and money led us to more conventional solutions.

¹²⁰ William Rutherford quoted Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 481.

¹²¹ Booker Wright, Jr. Interview.

¹²² Bernard S. Lee quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 476.

Basically, construction systems used the highest possible technology for planning and the lowest possible for building.¹²³

Other changes resulted from the lay of the land. The neighborhoods south of Main Street were in a heavily wooded area and had to be carefully organized around the landscape. Equipment shortages meant that only one of the three intended dining tents, only the one on the west side of the City functioned.

Despite the fact that these and other services failed to appear on Main Street, the place still lived up to its name. Main Street not only served as a meeting place, Wiebenson intended it to serve as the “central community spine”:

Because community services were located here, and because it went the length of the City, this was the place of greatest traffic—basically pedestrian. New services would naturally locate here. When a couple of Diggers (a San Francisco group organized to provide free goods) arrive, they put up their bakery here. In good weather, this became a meeting place; when looking for someone, or when looking for company, people would go to the public way. On the morning of Robert Kennedy’s assassination, this is where many stood, quietly, waiting for news.¹²⁴

All of the communications services—telephones and mail—were located on Main Street, as were City Hall. When visitors came to tour Resurrection City, they typically strolled down Main Street, as Wiebenson illustrates:

Visiting congressmen and celebrities walked this length, sometimes joining in a town meeting held there. At one end, it opened, through a guarded gate, into a parking area where reporters and curious onlookers might wait.¹²⁵

Main Street connected Resurrection City with the outside world and was also the site of the main daily gathering place, the Dining Hall.

¹²³ Wiebenson, “Planner’s Notebook,” 407.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 408.

SHARING MEALS

Abernathy suggests that meals were one of the key community building experiences in Resurrection City. He recounts,

We all ate together under one canvas roof, and everyone seemed pleased with the food, which was better and more plentiful than anything they had been used to. Most of this food was donated, and the rest we bought out of gifts from our supporters. With the land free and the food continuing to come in, we figured we could spend a week, a month, or a year in Washington—as long as we needed to make the government understand the needs of the poor people.¹²⁶

The Dining Hall, a giant bright blue tent, was one of the most inviting buildings and fostered community because participants knew they could gain both food and conversation by entering the open and lively space.¹²⁷ While the food was institutional—“nothing exotic”—three free square meals a day were much better than what most participants received back home.

The Food Committee, headed by Alice Arshack, included a wide range of volunteers, including union officers from food associated unions, dieticians, home economists, nutritionists, an ex-Marine Corps Chief Cook, and several others with relevant experience, including representatives from District and suburban social service councils, business management, as well as several black and white clergy. Due to SCLC’s slow and chaotic organizing style many D.C. officials moved to organize for the PPC on their own, often unaware of the extent to which SCLC had prepared to deal with each component of building and maintaining a functioning city that provided basic needs for its residents. The Food Committee met with the Health and Welfare Council at SCLC’s Washington headquarters at 14th and U Street because the Urban Coalition had

¹²⁶ Abernathy, 522.

¹²⁷ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 11.

called on the Health and Welfare Council to coordinate PPC committees because as their representative, Mr. Seaman, explained, “there were organizations and individuals who were interested in helping with the campaign, but who were not willing to work under the auspices of the Southern Christian Leadership.” After lengthy negotiations, SCLC leaders eventually conceded to the local businessmen and administrators’ demands so that Giant Foods would provide food for the first month of the PPC’s stay in Washington.¹²⁸

Working with limited resources and few indications of what type of facilities would be available, this group took the most efficient and economical approach to feeding the participants. Breakfast and lunch would be uncooked meals that required volunteers to prepare, serve, and clean up at the city site. Dinners would be cooked at large kitchens away from the site and then brought to the site to be served. Almost three hundred volunteers were needed in the first weeks to accomplish this goal.¹²⁹ In addition to the resources Giant Foods Corporation provided, SCLC asked volunteers for donations, primarily of dry goods and basic cooking necessities.¹³⁰ While Resurrection City residents only received one hot meal a day, those staying at the Hawthorne School

¹²⁸ On April 25, the Committee met with Joseph Dazansky, President of Giant Food Corporation, who had pledged to provide both food and support for the PPC, and other food industry officials to discuss what the PPC needed to feed the thousands of expected participants. Apparently, Danzansky had met with the Health & Welfare Council and the Urban Coalition and agreed that the Health & Welfare Council would accept all donations for the PPC’s food supplies and that this group would coordinate all other committees. Arshack tried to make it clear that SCLC had organized committees to oversee all of the city’s needs and that donations to SCLC earmarked for food would be tax exempt. In response, Bernard Lafayette “made it very clear that all the funds will go directly to SCLC” and that while SCLC encouraged the Council’s support, “the Campaign will be organized as it was previously set up,” but that the Council could help provide resources and could call meetings concerning information, recreation, and volunteers, “but only with an SCLC present,” but Daznasky refused to support the PPC unless the Council handled the funds. See KL, SCLC, 178:24.

¹²⁹ Information for Food Volunteers, SCLC 180:15.

were able to eat a hot breakfast and dinner, which caused some jealousy among participants.

CHILD CARE CENTER

Along with combating hunger and malnutrition, the children of the poor, many for the first time, were able to experience the benefits of a Head Start program at the Coretta Scott King Day Care Center. The National Association of Social Workers coordinated the efforts of various community agencies in developing the center, acquiring necessary buildings and equipment, and recruiting approximately seventy teachers from the Capital Head Start program and local private daycare centers who staffed the center. Wiebenson recounts that a local church group raised money for the materials, acquired what was needed and built the building for the childcare center. Since resources were scarce in the City, the group had security on guard, as Wiebenson explains, “to prevent their materials from being taken for less important projects.” Once completed, another group equipped the center and local and City volunteers staffed the center while parents participated in daily protests.¹³¹

The center provided basic speech, hearing, and reading skills, as well as daily recreational play and fieldtrips. By June 11, the center had enrolled sixty children between four months and ten-years-old in its six-day-a-week program.¹³² Audrey Gibson, one of the first directors of a Head Start program in the nation, headed up the program at Resurrection City, and child psychiatrist Dr. Walter Afield recorded their

¹³⁰ See Preliminary Food Contribution List, Walter Fauntroy Papers, Box 29, Folder 17, George Washington University.

¹³¹ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 6.

¹³² The Coretta Scott King Day-Care Center, June 11, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:23.

observations of the children's development in *Children of Resurrection City*. Not only did the daycare center provide free childcare for parents so that they could participate in the daily protests throughout the capital, these two childcare experts found that the children of Resurrection City benefited greatly from their time there. In the beginning the children seemed aggressive, unable to play, unable to communicate well with others, and overly attached to the childcare providers. After a week or more at the Head Start center, the children exhibited marked improvement in their ability to play well with others and demonstrated less aggressive behavior in general. While the children still clung to childcare providers every chance they could, in many ways they exhibited normal behavior for their age after their stay in the program rather than the dysfunctional behavior.¹³³

HEALTH CARE

The Health Services Coordinating Committee, which included members of the National Medical Association, the Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia, the local chapter of the AMA, the St. Luke's Physicians' Guild, the Red Cross, and the Medical Committee of Human Rights. Dr. Joe Rhyne (MD) and Dr. Harvey Webb (DDS) served as its coordinators, with Dr. David French (MD) acting as a liaison between the committee and SCLC.¹³⁴ By May 11, civil rights veterans in the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) had organized five hundred volunteers, primarily physicians, who were prepared to provide general health services for Resurrection City. This self-funded organization with twenty local organizations

¹³³ See Walter E. Afield and Audrey B. Gibson, *Children of Resurrection City* (Washington D.C.:

scattered throughout the nation had grown in the wake of the riots following Dr. King's assassination, and volunteers, such as nurses, lab technicians, and physicians for the PPC were plentiful. Mary Holman, a public health nurse and MCHR administrator along with MCHR's Washington director, Dr. Phil Askenase prepared to have a daily sick call for the City's residents, as well as providing immunizations and x-raying participants with serious issues. The Washington Pharmaceutical Association and approximately forty private pharmacists volunteered to assist the medical teams, and a number of pharmaceutical supply firms donated medicine. But only aspirin and first aid supplies were available without a prescription.¹³⁵

In addition to medical care, the National Dental Association created a Dental Service Program coordinated by Dr. Harvey Webb, Jr. in conjunction with the MCHR's general medical efforts. Volunteers included a group of junior and senior dental students and other interested practicing dentists. The unit within the city provided screening, diagnosis, education-orientation, oral hygiene instruction, preventive dentistry, referral services, sedative treatment, transportation to other facilities, and dental first aid. In addition to this station, a mobile dental trailer was located just outside the city that provided similar services, as well as prophylaxis and restorative services. These dental stations also provided referrals to nearby clinics and hospitals that could perform emergency and operative procedures.¹³⁶ Access to these services was limited at first because of their location. The public health agencies that provided the medical and dental

Association for Childhood Education International, 1970).

¹³⁴ Health Services Coordinating Committee, KL, SCLC, 178:29.

¹³⁵ Medical Committee Report, May 11, 1968, KL, SCLC, 178:29.

¹³⁶ Dental Services Field, Community Volunteer Dental Services, KL, SCLC, 178:29.

trailers required that they be held outside the city. PPC's architect John Wiebenson explains that,

This meant potential users would have to leave the City and cross an open area given over to cars, reporters, and curious onlookers. And, the information conveyed by this location was that the medical facilities were part of the alien environment and only incidentally for the residents. As many residents refused to make the crossing, the intentions of the doctors volunteering to help were somewhat countered.¹³⁷

The Health Services Coordinating Committee eventually moved the medical the Seventh Day Adventists had donated to the center of the City on a plaza near City Hall and reported that they had seen 1,000 patients. Two doctors, two nurses, and two medical students staffed each unit for six-hour shifts, conducting daily sick calls, physical examinations, and referral services. Dr. Rhyne reported that overall, residents experienced similar illnesses to the rest of the general population. Once the weather turned rainy and cold, the units saw a rise in upper respiratory infections and some cases of pneumonia. The Committee suggested that hot water needed to be installed and complained that garbage disposal needed to be improved.¹³⁸

Mentally ill adults and children also received help during their stay at Resurrection City from the staff at the medical center. Populations of poor people inherently have a higher proportion of mentally ill than other population groups, and Resurrection City was no exception. The mental health staff was not only able to identify and treat, at least temporarily, poor people with chronic mental health problems, they were also able to help both the poor people and their middle-class leaders with the stress of living in the encampment, participating in daily protests, and coping with the movement's internal

¹³⁷ Wiebenson, "An Outline of Resurrection City As Used," 18.

conflicts. Many people who suffered from long-term mental illness were given contacts both in Washington and in their home regions where they could receive sustained help once the campaign was over.¹³⁹ Therefore, regardless of the success of the campaign in terms of obtaining its demands, the poor people who traveled to Washington were able to receive improved health and childcare, at least temporarily.

COMMUNICATION & ENTERTAINMENT

The Communications Center had an extensive staff and program that included a variety of programs. Catherine Jones edited King's speeches and current PPC speeches and interviews for the weekly Martin Luther King Speaks Radio Program, while Hal Lenke covered daily activities of the PPC on Radio News. Roland Betts worked with residents to help service their needs and coordinate operations with the Communications Center as head of Resurrection City Broadcasting, and Terry Harris ran a Folk Program in Resurrection City. Kit Clarke ran a Radio-TV Information Center, providing resources and information to media outlets, while William Stafford Murray and Joe McGovern were in charge of all communications equipment. Murray oversaw the Citizens Band radio, ham radio operation, PM radio, mobile radio units, and walkie-talkies, while McGovern ran the Equipment Center who provided tape recorders to reporters, maintained supplies of audio tapes, and handled newsfeed to radio stations.¹⁴⁰ Along with the Communications Center, SCLC had an Information office located on New York

¹³⁸ Health Services Coordinating Committee, KL, SCLC, 178:29.

¹³⁹ See Ad Hoc Report Committee, Psychiatric Service. Health Services Coordinating Committee, Resurrection City, "Psychiatric Services to a Sustained Protest Campaign: An On-Site, Walk-In Clinic at Resurrection City," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 125 (May 11, 1969): 97-105.

¹⁴⁰ SCLC Communications Center, KL, SCLC, 177:14.

Avenue that produced all of the PPC's publications. Thomas Offenburger served as the Director of Information and coordinated the activities of the *Soul Force* editorial board, the publicity committee, and all of the office's photographers, writers, and artists.¹⁴¹

Bill Cosby, Sidney Poitier, and France Nuyen met with SCLC staff to organize an entertainment committee that would recruit available entertainers to visit Resurrection City. The committee hoped these celebrities would not only provide nightly entertainment, but that they would also “walk and walk with the poor people and with the leadership,” “instill hope and confidence within the City,” “state approval merely by their presence, in the eyes of the world press,” and leave the public with “a fuller understanding of the message that is being espoused there.” PPC organizers arranged for a stage to be built facing the Lincoln Memorial at the head of the pond, backed by the Washington Monument, where the grass field could accommodate approximately five to ten thousand people. Entertainers were required to pay their own travel and hotel expenses with the Tent City Rangers providing the stars with transportation to and from their hotels and the City. The entertainers were also asked to do TV and radio spots in support of the PPC and to visit local churches and meetings to “get the true message” of the PPC to the public. Some notable stars that participated included Marlon Brando, Merv Griffin, and Steve Allen.¹⁴² Milton Garret recounts seeing both Harry Bellafonte and Bill Cosby while Augusta Denson remembers enjoying a number of performances: “I heard James Brown, Little Richard, and Mahalia Jackson. I had never saw her before

¹⁴¹ Information Center, KL, SCLC, 177:14.

until then. And Ray Charles, too.”¹⁴³ Many of these performers charged top dollar for their shows, so yet again, the PPC provided an opportunity for participants that they probably would have never had otherwise, giving them the chance to enjoy some of the top performers of the era.

THE MANY RACES SOUL CENTER

In addition to the entertainment provided by the Hollywood-based Entertainment Committee, SCLC staff member and former Deacon for Defense, Rev. Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick, served as director of the PPC’s Cultural Program. The purpose of this program was to develop pride and awareness of the different groups’ histories and cultures. Kirkpatrick arranged for a folk culture tent, named the Many Races Soul Center, to be established in Resurrection City where both well-known and unknown folk artists and musicians would perform and conduct workshops for participants. With the help of Jimmy Collier, who Kirkpatrick had composed and produced a record of Freedom Songs with, and Anne Romasco, who had worked at the Highlander Folk School where she used art, music, dancing, and literature to foster interracial understanding among black and white students, the staff produced cultural programs for participants. Workshops included “the history of worksongs and spirituals, Gospel music, blues and country,” which were explained through the use of both recordings and live performances. Singers from the Georgia Sea Islands performed their unique music, while

¹⁴² Minutes of the meeting of the Entertainment and Information Committee of the Hollywood SCLC, Wednesday, May 22, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:40.

¹⁴³ See Milton Garrett Interview and Augusta Denson Interview.

folklorist Alan Lomax discussed the performance, detailing the style's connections to African musical traditions.

On the evening of May 29, a massive jam session took place in the Cultural Tent that included along with more traditional instruments like harmonicas, trumpets, guitars, and drums, more makeshift instruments such as a barrel, a tin can, and a whiskey bottle. An elderly American Indian man from North Dakota chanted "I hate that war," prompting Jimmy Collier to make comparisons to Dr. King, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and "all of them people who know how to 'talk music.'" The Georgia Sea Islander singers captivated the audience again with what Collier deemed "'the roots of black soul music.'" Other notable performers who spent time at the Cultural Tent included Pete Seeger, folk guitarist Elizabeth Cotton and activist, singer, and founder of Sweet Honey and the Rock, Bernice Reagon. SCLC staff member Mariette Wickes reported that Reagon had "Tent City singing and shouting, rocking and clapping to the boat of the old spirituals, the original freedom songs whose lyrics she referred to not as 'Negro dialect' but as 'Afro-American language.'"¹⁴⁴ The cultural programs introduced each group's customs to the others and fostered a sense of community since all groups involved were interested in preserving their cultural heritage and exposing the public to their history.

TRUE UNITY NEWS AND SOUL FORCE

In order to communicate news of the events taking place and cultural productions being made in Resurrection City, a group organized to produce *True Unity News*. The

newspaper's editor, who went simply by Akbar, declared that the purpose of the paper was to "write what has to be said to help advance the goals of the people; Self Help—Economic Control—Cultural Pride—Land—Self Determination," goals that clearly mimicked those of many black power organizations. The paper's philosophy was "Unite. No matter what religion or philosophy you many have, let's get ourselves together."¹⁴⁵ The newspaper included an Information Line that updated residents of important notices both during and after the City's existence, as well as a section called "Abernathy Speaks," which allowed SCLC's president to communicate directly with the residents, particularly since he was seldom seen among the mud in Resurrection City. The vast majority of the available issues of *True Unity News* contained poems written by the staff and by residents of Resurrection City, reflecting on their lives, but more often on their experiences with the PPC.

The articles included were diverse but reflected the political climate by reporting on various activists groups working within the PPC and in U.S. society at large. One issue included an article about the Baha'I faith's emphasis on the wealthy aiding the poor, and another reported about a group of "militants" who disrupted the NAACP's annual convention held in Atlantic City and formed an organization called the National Committee to Revitalize the NAACP. The June 7 issue, the third in the series, was designed to help residents cope with the loss of yet another anti-poverty leader, Robert Kennedy. The front-page headline read, "What Does the Assassination Mean to You?"

¹⁴⁴ Mariette Wickes, Cultural Program: Poor People's Campaign, May 30, 1968, KL, SCLC, 180:4.

and the paper included a variety of articles reflecting the reactions from SCLC staff, Resurrection City residents, press members who witnessed the assassination, and congressmen close to the senator. Providing a rare exception to what was otherwise a patriarchal-structured social movement, the June 13 edition's headlines read "Woman Power! Mrs. King Is Honorary Vice-Chairman of June 19 March," and "Women Plan to Display Woman Power, Watch out, America!" The article reported that the women of Resurrection City and the Washington area were joining forces for the Solidarity Day march "to display Woman Power in the Poor People's Campaign." The group of women warned that if the government tried to shut down Resurrection City that the women would surround the city, forcing the police to confront the women first. These articles were followed by a poem titled, "A Woman's Dream."¹⁴⁶

Along with serving as an assistant editor of *True Unity News*, J. Edward Haycraft, a black writer for the *Louisville News* and the *Louisville Defender*, distributed a collection of songs called *In Resurrection City*. The song titles included, "You Can't Keep Us Down," "They Say She's the Devil," "At Your Command My Heart," and the title track "In Resurrection City." The chorus went as follows:

"We came in droves with new hope. The young, the old, the gritty. We dared to build upon a dream, In Resurrection City. We left behind hopelessness, For we were tired of pity, We seek only true dignity, In Resurrection City. The die is cast, for all the past. White fold come to your senses, Give an account for yesterday, And all your old pretenses. You must pay for your folly. Come deal with our committee, Pray, do not underrate the mood, In Resurrection City"

¹⁴⁵ Mariette Wickes, Cultural Program: Poor People's Campaign, May 30, 1968, KL, SCLC, 180:4. Along with Akbar, the editorial staff included Assistant Editor, Bill Mahoney, and Associate Editors J. Edward Haycraft, Jack Ellwanger, Gordon White, and Shanna Russell.

¹⁴⁶ *True Unity News of Resurrection City*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 6, & un-numbered undated issue post-June 24, 1968, KL, SCLC, 180:14.

Haycraft sold the songbooks for fifty cents and donated all the proceedings to the PPC.¹⁴⁷ He and his *In Resurrection City* were promoted in another publication made available in Resurrection City, *Soul Force*. SCLC dedicated the fourth issue of *Soul Force: the Official Journal of the Southern Leadership Conference* to Resurrection City, publishing it on June 19 to correspond with the PPC highlight Solidarity March. The issue included reprints from several issues of *True Unity News*, as well as articles detailing the demands of the Mexican American and American Indian groups working in the PPC, profiling the social and cultural services made available in the City. The journal also included some of the poetry from staff writers and Resurrection City residents, as well as stories of how the City had benefited individual participants. *Soul Force* also reported on the reactions to the PPC from both Congress and the public.¹⁴⁸

THE POOR PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY

One of the focal points of the PPC was the Poor People's University (PPU). Based on the model of the Freedom Schools, the PPU was intended to "bring about ameliorative action by educating and equipping the participants to deal effectively with the established structures of power." The university was created for both participants and the many volunteer students who went to Washington to assist the PPC. The goal was to have a diverse population of students who could learn from one another's experiences as they debated contemporary issues and discussed the information they received from the various lectures given. SCLC hoped that the PPU would "provide the basis for far-reaching and long-lasting ameliorative change," and was intended to be the

¹⁴⁷J. Edward Haycraft, "In Resurrection City," KL, SCLC, 178:27.

first stage of SCLC's nationwide "action-oriented program," the Summer Task Force, for which they hoped to mobilize college students to do grassroots activists work wherever SCLC identified a need. SCLC hoped that this program would lead to a permanent "collegiate SCLC-type organizational framework." The main focus of the lectures would be to understand poverty and discuss the tactics for its elimination.

One of the predominant leaders in the PPU was Charles Cheng. His goal was to mimic the tactics and philosophy of the Freedom Schools, producing an open, egalitarian, and judgment-free atmosphere where students could reflect on their own personal experiences to understand how they reflected broader social trends. Cheng envisioned that classes would be "conducted from under the tree at Resurrection City" the teachers who were "there not as an authoritarian person but as a resource that he or she had as much to learn from the poor people as they might have to contribute to them."¹⁴⁹

Like many of the services included as part of the PPC, the PPU had several committees to cover all of the needs of establishing a university. The General Coordinating Committee, composed of SCLC staff, was responsible for coordinating the curriculum, recruiting faculty and staff, acquiring equipment, facilities, and information. A Resource Committee was in charge of compiling information on relevant films and literature and providing a bibliography for orientation sessions and contacts for other resources. Other committees included a Locale Committee, a Registration Committee, a Logistics Committee to troubleshoot and prepare lists of local restaurants and resources and maps of classrooms, and a Newsletter Committee that advertised the day's lectures

¹⁴⁸ *Soul Force*, Vol. 1, No. 4, (June 19, 1968), KL, SCLC, 180:3.

and activities, and other information of interest.¹⁵⁰ The PPU's organizers held training sessions four to five weeks prior to the opening of Resurrection City at which they developed the school's curriculum and conducted sensitivity training sessions.

The PPU opened its doors on May 29 at American University's downtown campus. The workshops held on the first day of class included English as a Racist Language, which was held at noon, and University Reform, History of Violent and Non-violent Action and Protest, and Social Problems of the Poor, which met at 2:00.¹⁵¹ Some other lecture titles included How to Talk to a Congressman and Get Results, Education, Vietnam, Ethics of Guaranteed Annual Income, Rural and Urban Planning, Dynamics of Social Change, Problems of Human Communications, Man's First Literature, Social Welfare Problems, Negro in American Literature, and Miseducation of Teachers—How to Train Teachers to Alienate Students.¹⁵² In addition to the lectures held at American University's campus, during the first week of June the PPU staff initiated a daily keynote address that would be given in front of the Reflection Pool next to Resurrection City. Some of the talks included Robert Theobald discussing the negative income tax, Alex Haley lecturing on Black literature, and Dave Dellinger giving a speech on Vietnam.¹⁵³ Stoney Cooks recounts that they were able to hold twenty-five successful lecture series in Resurrection City, as well as about thirteen lectures at George Washington University and American University, and two at Howard University. Lecturers included Michael

¹⁴⁹ Charles Cheng Interview.

¹⁵⁰ Structure for the Poor People's University, KL, SCLC, 179:23.

¹⁵¹ Newsletter for the Poor People's Campaign, May 29, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:23.

¹⁵² Newsletter for the Poor People's University, May 31st, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:23.

Harrington, I.F Stone, Dave Dillinger, Barbara Denning, an associate of Gandhi named Majunda, as well as campaign leaders, such as Corky Gonzalez and James Bevel.¹⁵⁴

Cheng, one of the PPU's primary organizers, insists that overall,

The workshops were very good. There was a lot of debate and discussion. I think a lot of people became acquainted with the new kinds of approaches to what classes should be and they were intensified. And we regularly had a hundred to two hundred people show up every week. So that was deep involvement.¹⁵⁵

He recounts that at one session where they played Malcolm X's "A Message to Grassroots" and "surprisingly many people were really very disturbed" but the encounter produced "a good discussion at that time. There were definitely a lot of serious problems with the whites there and there was a lot of black-white confrontations at that time."¹⁵⁶Tense encounters were not limited to those among the participants.

Middle-class whites had to confront their own issues when dealing directly with the minority poor. For instance, Michael Harrington had an intense exchange when he delivered a lecture at the PPU. He recounts that he was sitting on the ground with a group when "a black man among them, I think with emotional problems, decided that I was the incarnation of white racism." Although Harrington was delivering a lecture attacking racism and the poverty it produced, the man wanted to know why Harrington "was in favor of racism and poverty in the United States. And he got very agitated. And I became concerned that he could physically attack me. The meeting sort of came to a very unhappy ending." Rather than accepting this as an individual encounter, Harrington

¹⁵³ SCLC News Report—Poor People's University, KL, SCLC, 179:23. For a full list of the lectures offered, see the attached Poor People's University: Proposed Workshop Topics, KL, SCLC, 179:23.

¹⁵⁴ Stoney Cooks Interview.

¹⁵⁵ Charles Cheng Interview.

interpreted this event as a sign that “one of the most marvelous political movements in America in the form which it took under Martin Luther King from 1955 to 1968 had come to an end. And that beloved community was gone forever.”¹⁵⁷ While Harrington saw the PPC as the symbol of the end of an era, Charles Cheng saw the PPC as a wonderful learning experience, “Actually it’s my opinion that the whole Resurrection City experience was a Freedom School.”¹⁵⁸

On June 20-21, SCLC held a two-day seminar for the “non-poor” at the PPU’s Tent located in Resurrection City. The conference included a wide range of participants. Many activists participated, from famous stars like Ossie Davis and popular writers like Michael Harrington to the lesser-known Juanita Abernathy. Several different anti-poverty groups were represented, such as the NWRO, the Citizen’s Crusade Against Poverty (CCAP), PRIDE, Inc., Americans for Democratic Action, Spanish Community Action, the National Indian Youth Council, and the Association of American Indian Affairs, but there were also activists from other types of organizations, such Women’s Strike for Peace and the League of Women Voters. Various government officials joined in the panels, such as Rep. James H. Schever (D-NY), Senator Harrison Williams (D-NJ), OEO’s Dr. Robert Levine and Iray Kaye, and HEW economist Mollie Orshansky. In addition to activists and government officials, the conference also included religious leaders, academics, and notable officials from other social services organizations, such as the National Association for Community Development, the United Planning Organization

¹⁵⁶ Charles Cheng Interview.

¹⁵⁷ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 477-478.

¹⁵⁸ Charles Cheng Interview.

(UPO), Community Advisers on Equal Employment, NYC Commission of Addictions and the Center for Manpower Studies at George Washington University.

The panels included Children of Poverty, Hunger and Poverty, Housing, Law and Employment, a Poverty Roundtable, Poverty of the Puerto Rican-American, Poverty of the Mexican-American, Poverty of the American Indian, Rural and Urban Poverty, and You and Poverty.¹⁵⁹ The PPU, perhaps more than any other element of the PPC, influenced the different ethnic groups involved in the campaign as radical activists and scholars across the nation worked to institutionalize the concept first displayed in the freedom schools.

During the 1970s, the Chicano and American Indian movements grew alongside the black power movement a multiracial coalition of activists fought to influence the structure and content of their universities' curriculums and to increase their minority faculty and student representation. While students and activists sought to form ethnic studies departments throughout the nation's schools, emphasizing the importance of knowing one's own cultural and historical background, white liberal critics quickly criticized the turn away from economic-based movements to what many identified as "identity politics." But the PPC demonstrated that all of these groups recognized the economic component of their oppression and how racism and economic exploitation had contributed to an unrepresentative education system.

¹⁵⁹ Two-Day Seminar for the Non-Poor, KL, SCLC, 179:24.

CONCLUSION

While participants varied in the degree to which they accessed Resurrection City's resources, most received better social services during their stay in the nation's capital than they had ever received at home. Abernathy recounts how he was "touched by the eager and grateful way they responded to these services" and remarked how for the first time many participants "felt genuinely part of a real community, something most people take for granted."¹⁶⁰ Some participants expressed a loss of community once their caravans arrived in Washington, but the unity participants experienced while in Resurrection City was still potentially greater than any sense of connection they felt in their own communities. The City's architect recognized that the City served many functions simultaneously:

As a symbol, it was to make visible the American poor. It was to stand for their needs, hopes and frustrations. For some, it stood for more than severe poverty, poor diets, poor housing, poor medical attention. Some, better off, were now seeking relief from social and political injustices, usually those stemming from race. Some wanted the means to join the rest of the country in acquiring the advertised paraphernalia of abundance. Some looked for more meaning to their national and individual lives. But for many, it stood for poverty. As a city, it was to be composed of representatives of these poor. Those who came included some who were there for the excitement of the trip. But, most were there to represent the poor.¹⁶¹

The City served as a utopia, demonstrating the potential of a multiracial poor people's movement and all of the resources available if people chose to help the poor. Yet the City was also a dystopia that displayed poverty in all its grit and chaos. Images of mud bedraggled poor people dominated the press, and the City as a whole received primarily

¹⁶⁰ Abernathy, 514.

¹⁶¹ Wiebenson, "An Outline of Resurrection City As Used," 1.

negative reviews from the media and scholars, but living in the City was a significant and worthwhile experiences for many participants.

Similarly, the daily protests participants enacted at various government agencies failed to inspire the press, but participants recount that they gained a great deal from protesting for their basic needs and confronting their political representatives. The following chapter explores the PPC's other main components, the daily protests at government agencies and the June 19 highlight, the "Solidarity Day."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Poor People's Lobby-In: Daily Protests & Solidarity Day

“It ought to be a continuing, massive lobby-in. Now, not just one day, every time people come in that town, they are to go straight to Capitol Hill, to the departments of government, Justice Department, Department of Commerce, Health, Wealth and Education. They just going day in and day out.”¹

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On May 17, the fourteenth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* decision, as participants were traveling to Washington in their various caravans or settling into their newly built tents in Resurrection City, *Time* magazine ran a ten page piece titled “A Nation Within A Nation,” that provided details on the scope and symptoms of U.S. poverty and hunger, accompanied by compelling photographs of the nation’s geographically and ethnically diverse poor. The article failed to mention the PPC directly, despite the fact that the movement coincided with the piece. The article included a section titled “Hopelessness and Helplessness,” that on one page proposed how it was the powerful in society who perpetuated poverty, declaring,

“For if the poor share anything it is oppressors: credit dentists and credit opticians; credit furniture stores and credit food markets where for half again as much the affluent pay, stale bread and rank hamburger are lobbed off on the poor.”²

Yet on the very next page the magazine touted the culture of poverty theory, quoting psychologist Ira Goldenberg who defined poverty as “hopelessness and helplessness, a view of the world and oneself as static, limited and irredeemably expendable . . . a condition of being in which one’s past and future meet in the present—and go no

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., “The Promised Land, 1967-1968,” *Eyes on the Prize II*, Episode 4 (Boston: Blackside Productions, 1990).

² “A Nation Within A Nation,” *Time*, May 17, 1968, 24-32, 29.

further.”³ The will of thousands of poor people to leave their homes, travel across the country to the nation’s capital, camp out in the mud on the National Mall, and risk their safety and potential jail time by participating in daily protests defies representations of the poor as both “hopeless and helpless.” This chapter will explore those daily protests to better understand how participating in nonviolent direct action and confronting government representatives face-to-face affected participants and their chances of getting their basic needs met.

The same issue of *Time* also included an article titled “What Can I Do?” that considered the role affluent Americans could play in eradicating poverty. While the article did not mention the Poor People’s Campaign directly, it suggested that its fallen leader still held sway over the nation’s conscience:

Like no other single event in the history of the U.S. race relations, the assassination of King, a man who staked his life on his country’s conscience, drove home the need for personal commitment to a cause that can easily be lost by default.⁴

Time reported on the recent actions of concerned white Americans who had conducted protests across the nation. SCLC was banking on an outpouring of liberal white support for the PPC’s big showcase, Solidarity Day, originally scheduled for May 30, to coincide with Memorial Day weekend. The march had to be postponed due to a host of complications, but it was finally held on an equally symbolic day, June 19, known as Juneteenth, a day African Americans celebrate marking the anniversary of when the last slaves in Texas were notified of their freedom.

³ “A Nation Within A Nation,” *Time*, May 17, 1968, 30.

⁴ “What Can I Do?” *Time*, May 17, 1968, 46.

This chapter charts the organizing efforts for Solidarity Day and the intense leadership struggles and complications that occurred during the planning of this event. Previous studies of the PPC have suggested that the SCLC's focus on getting maximum participation for this one-day event harmed the daily protests. SCLC prevented the protests from escalating to mass arrests, fearing they would not have enough people for the big press event. Instead, this chapter focuses on what actually occurred during these daily protests and how protesting affected the participants. While the protests might not have seemed as the dramatic violent confrontations of previous years, the activists displayed creativity as they launched theatrical protests at government institutions, and on occasion, on politicians' front lawns.

It is clear that the PPC failed to achieve its ultimate goals of guaranteed jobs and income, but this chapter will consider what the daily protests and the specter of Resurrection City on the National Mall did achieve. Substantial legislation was passed during the PPC's stay in Washington, and there is no doubt that the presence of thousands of poor people in the nation's capital contributed to the passage of anti-poverty and fair housing legislation. Throughout May and June, various government agencies presented their responses to the Committee of 100's initial demands. Those responses will be analyzed to assess the extent to which each government institution took action to ameliorate the problems of the poor.

DAILY PROTESTS

The first official protest began before Resurrection City had even opened. On Sunday, May 12, approximately 5,000 protesters joined with Coretta Scott King and

leaders of the National Welfare Rights Organization in a Mother's Day March protesting poverty and the fact that women and children were the overwhelming majority of the poor. The protesters marched twelve blocks through some of the most impoverished areas of Washington. At Cardozo High School's stadium, King gave a speech condemning a "Congress that passes laws which subsidize corporations, farms, oil companies, airlines and houses for suburbia . . . But when it turns to the poor, it suddenly becomes concerned about balancing the budget."⁵ The alliance with the NWRO was significant and demonstrated that the anti-poverty and welfare rights movement had officially embraced the PPC.

While SCLC staff and volunteers worked to build Resurrection City, Anthony Henry began to reestablish contact with various government agencies. On May 14, PPC leaders met with their friendliest target, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), for the second time. Henry lunched with OEO's Director of Community Action Programs, Theodore Barry, and Maurice Dawkins of his staff, as well as Associate Director of OEO's Program Policy, Mr. Hess. Barry imparted that OEO was "anxious to make the guidelines and the vocabulary of its programs clear to poor people," while Dawkins insisted that the PPC's demands had "already been affirmatively answered by OEO" and that the department was "acting within the limitations of their powers to reply to those demands with positive action." Yet, Barry reassured Henry that "OEO seeks to establish a continuous and ongoing program of strategy and experiment with the Poor People's Campaign." In addition to this promise, Dawkins guaranteed Henry that OEO would make 50,000 laborers from the CAP programs available to the PPC.

⁵"The Scene at ZIP Code 20013," *Time*, May 24, 1968, 29.

Unlike other government institutions, the OEO welcomed visits from the PPC's participants, but the department was not a common site of protest because OEO was lower on the list of offenders than most. In fact, Barry offered the department as "an ally in confronting other agencies and organizations" and promised to have OEO staff visit the participants in Resurrection City and educate them about the available anti-poverty programs. Henry warned OEO officials that they would not be the only ones supplying information, cautioning them that they should be prepared for "at least six hours of harangue before there is substantive discussion of OEO programs because resentment and fury has long been accumulating." He insisted that if the Office's representatives prepared themselves for this response "insult and snapped communication will be averted," and that OEO's public endorsement of the PPC and its officials regular presence in Resurrection City would ameliorate most resistance.⁶

While the vast majority of government officials consistently opposed the PPC's existence, on May 16 the National Labor Relations Board reported that federal employees were allowed to participate in the PPC "without that participation having an adverse effect upon their Government employment." Yet the Civil Service Commission's General Counsel, who made the decision, also stipulated that,

If the march should be directed against some particular agency of Government in such a way as to constitute public criticism of the agency or its programs, Federal employees, and particularly employees of that agency, should not participate.⁷

⁶ Lenneal J. Henderson, "Proceedings of lunch conference with officials of the Office of Economic Opportunity, May 14, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:17.

⁷ National Labor Relations Board Administrative Bulletin, "Participation in the 'Poor People's March'—Questions and Answers," KL, SCLC, 179:3.

The Counsel indicated that employees whose job it was “to make and support” policy should not participate, and no federal employees were allowed to advertise PPC events in the workplace, explaining that promoting the PPC might have legal ramifications.

PPC leaders also mobilized the local community in support of the PPC. On May 19, Andrew Young delivered a moving sermon at the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Washington to rally local support for the movement. Young pulled on the conscience of the congregation declaring that the poor “come here because they see that the system by which God’s goods are distributed is not adequate for them.” Young not only challenged the Christians present to live up to the teachings about the poor in the *Bible*, he also confronted those who supported the culture of poverty theory:

And though we know who the poor are quite often we don’t realize that we are the blind; that we are the blind who have swallowed the rumors that the poor are poor because they are lazy. That the poor are poor because they don’t have the abilities that we have; that the poor are poor because of some innate inferiority of their own; and because too often we have given in to these rumors and bowed to this mythology, we are the blind. We are the blind who have not taken the time to analyze our society and understand how and why people are poor. We are those who like to blot out part of our past, which contradicts our own image of ourselves, rather than really face the truth of our society.⁸

After challenging the congregation to scrutinize their society more closely, Young went on to explain why a disproportionate percentage of the poor were people of color:

You see, black people are poor because our nation intended it that way. Black people are poor because they were brought here as slaves. Black people are poor because even to this day they are not allowed to get an education. Black people are poor because they are categorically denied job opportunities, even when they have received education . . . it is amazing how easily we forget this and how we build an elaborate mythology to overlook it.⁹

⁸ “A sermon preached at the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, D.C. by the Rev. Andrew J. Young, Executive Vice-President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference on May, 19, 1968,” KL, SCLC, 49:34.

⁹ Ibid.

Providing example after example, Young demonstrated that when African Americans' experiences are included in the historical record, the myth of the Protestant work ethic begins to crumble. He demonstrated how while freed slaves were denied even their meager forty acres and a mule, Congress continued to subsidize white citizens, while refusing to "do the same thing for the present poor of this generation that we did for the white poor for the last 100 years." Young went on to document inequities in the areas of education, employment, housing, labor unions, welfare, health care, and the justice system and explained to the congregation that these problems not only faced poor blacks, but Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans American Indians, and white Appalachians, as well. He explained that the purpose of the PPC was to expose the problem since the poor were typically invisible, suggesting that when the poor were made visible "on the Mall . . . when you walk them around the Capitol a few times, when they pray in front of the White house, when the press of the world comes in here to hear the stories of the poor, you upset the system and the system will be forced to modify itself."¹⁰ While Young was able to clearly articulate the vision King had for the PPC to different audiences, other SCLC leaders were less capable of maintaining the dream King had for a prolonged act of mass civil disobedience that would sway the nation's conscience.

The PPC received a great deal of assistance for their cause when CBS aired a documentary, "Hunger in America," on May 21, 1968.¹¹ The documentary exposed the severity of U.S. poverty to thousands of viewers, while the PPC continued to fight for the

¹⁰ "A sermon preached at the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, D.C. by the Rev. Andrew J. Young, Executive Vice-President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference on May, 19, 1968," KL, SCLC, 49:34.

public's attention as the war in Vietnam became more hotly contested and student rebellions erupted all over the world. On May 23, Abernathy planned a meeting with Secretary Freeman at the Department of Agriculture. Originally, the Secretary had agreed to meet with up to one hundred participants, but after discussion decided that doing so would create a "a bad precedent for other departments with poorer facilities," limiting the number to between fifteen and twenty-five and insisted that, "the policy of all meetings, such as the Freeman meeting, should be closed meetings with no tape recorders or cameras or reporters present."¹² Two busloads of participants traveled to the Department of Agriculture the following day and held an additional protest at which they, according to the Attorney General's office, "formed two concentric circles and marched hand-in-hand" around the building. The Department's Assistant Secretary Robertson reportedly confronted Jesse Jackson and after some discussion agreed to have Under Secretary Schmittler meet with three representatives, while the rest had to remain outside the building unless it rained. Two women, a Mrs. Home and Mrs. Gennary, and one man, Mr. Brooks, met with the Under Secretary to discuss the hunger issues the nation's poor faced.¹³

While SCLC's leadership was defying King's vision of mass civil disobedience by limiting the potential intensity of the protest, Yippies and local motorcycle clubs were in New York City reportedly planning to take over St. Marks Place, using stolen street signs to divert traffic while they set off a bomb to attract attention for their cause, which

¹¹ CBS Reports, "Hunger in America," Broadcast Tuesday May 21, 1968, KL, SCLC, 43:14.

¹² "Memorandum for the Attorney General," May 23, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark's Papers, LBJ Library.

was to pressure city officials to provide better services for hippies and to permanently close the street down to traffic. Yippies were engaging in militant acts to help disaffected, primarily white middle-class youth demand services from a spot in the city where they liked to hang out.¹⁴ These white youth were willing to take risks to secure a public space, while SCLC's middle-class black leadership was hesitant to perform confrontational direct action protests because they were saving up their energy for a big parade—Solidarity Day, preventing the thousands of poverty warriors from enacting equally as dramatic, and potentially effective, protests.

While the Yippies were enacting theatrical protests, one friend of the PPC, Senator John J. Williams was working as an advocate for the poor down the road on Capitol Hill. The Senator delivered a speech before Congress that same day, arguing that the proposed six billion dollar mandatory reduction in expenditures would have disastrous results. He suggested that instead, the government could “save a minimum of \$600 million per year” if the Congress adopted his amendment proposing “a \$10,000 ceiling on the amount which can be paid to any individual farmer under the farm subsidy program,” and almost a billion dollars could be saved if the payments were limited to \$5,000 for an individual farmer. Williams provided a list of farmers who received cash payments exceeding \$50,000, insisting that of these fifteen received between half a million and a million each, while five operations were paid over a million each. Echoing the sentiments of many of the PPC's participants, Williams declared,

¹³ Daily Log, May 24, 1968, Kossack and Belcher, 6:00 p.m. Attorney General Ramsey Clark's Papers, LBJ Library.

¹⁴ Daily Log, May 24, 1968, 5:55 p.m. FBI, Thompson, Attorney General Ramsey Clark's Papers, LBJ Library.

At a time when the Administration is shedding so many crocodile tears over the plight of the hungry in America it is a farce to see them at the same time paying millions to corporate-type farming operations not to produce crops.¹⁵

One of the PPC's chief complaints concerned federal subsidies for agri-business, and the Department of Agriculture would remain the most frequented government institution throughout the campaign.

Meanwhile, participants were growing restless with the moderate tone of the protests. Richard Romero explained his disappointment with the PPC's stalling tactics:

It was our theory that we were coming out here to confront the government on different issues, and so far, to date, there hadn't been much confrontation. We came here to make changes, and not to ask for money to be channeled into the same OEO programs that isn't doing the job today . . . We didn't come here to lay around here.¹⁶

That same evening, Jackson finally escalated the PPC's protests, taking a group of participants to a "cocktail party" at the home of Congressman Wilbur D. Mills, Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. Reports indicated that the participants formed a circular picket on the Congressman's front lawn until a deputy police chief broke up the demonstration and advised the group that if they did not disperse they would be arrested. The group sang civil rights songs like, "We Shall Overcome," as well as singing "Happy Birthday" to Congressman Mills. Unfortunately, the Congressman was not at home at the time to hear the serenade, so the group peacefully returned to Resurrection City.¹⁷ Four days later, on May 27, Jackson repeated

¹⁵ Statement of John J. Williams, U.S.S., May 23, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:42.

¹⁶ Richard Romero Interview.

¹⁷ Daily Log, May 24, 1968, 7:40 p.m. Belcher, Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

this pattern leading yet another group of participants to the Department of Agriculture in the morning and to Congressman Mills in the afternoon.¹⁸

One of the Jackson-led trips to the Department of Agriculture turned out to be one of the more theatrical protests during the early stages of the PPC. Sporting a nicely trimmed Afro and donning a green turtleneck and tan tweed blazer, Jackson led a group of participants to the Agriculture building. Jackson explains, “We had to march for some food, so we decided to march to the Agriculture Department because we were putting focus on feeding and nutrition. So we went and grouped food and Agriculture Department.” Pausing in front of a picture of a young white boy with rosy cheeks surrounded by bountiful food, Jackson quipped, “He got more than he can eat, sitting up there grinning while people are starving. Now, this is America that Mr. Freeman knows, but this is not the America Mrs. Brooks knows.” Journalist Daniel Schorr recounts how Jackson took them to the Department’s cafeteria where participants “picked up trays. And when they’d all gone through the line, Jackson . . . announced to everybody, ‘Okay,’ he said, “This government owes us a lot and they’ve just began to pay a little bit of it with this lunch.”¹⁹ This protest was one of the liveliest, and probably enjoyable, of all since participants not only got to enact a direct action protest but also got a bountiful free lunch out of the demonstration. While SCLC paid the bill to avoid any problems, the activists were prepared for whatever transpired.

In case of arrest, the Legal Services Committee prepared extensive instructions

¹⁸ Daily Log, May 27, Border Patrol, 11:05 a.m., Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

for participants. The activists were to try to remember any people who might have witnessed the arrest and to, if possible, write down the arresting officer's name and badge number. The Committee also informed participants of their rights, explaining that they had to give consent to be searched before they were arrested and to note who conducted the search and what they confiscated, as well as whether or not the search was consensual. The legal team warned participants that it often took up to twenty-four hours after being arrested before arrested and that participants should determine what personal items they wanted to attempt to bring with them. The information sheet assured participants that they had legal counsel to represent them and instructed participants not speak to anyone but an attorney about what took place prior to their arrest. The final instruction was to "Sing on the bus all the way over to the jail. Sing whenever you are in a group. The cohesive camaraderie that develops helps during the waiting hours."²⁰ While SCLC prepared participants in case of possible arrest, government officials made plans to cope with the spontaneous and unpredictable daily protests.

The American Indian group held one of the most dramatic and improvised protests of the PPC. Abernathy recounts that on the morning of May 31, twenty-five men arrived at his tent "dressed in their various tribal costumes, their faces covered with colorful paint, carrying tom-toms, ritual tomahawks, and peace pipes." The group "looking like a war party on patrol" marched to the Supreme Court, where they hoped to confront the nine justices with their demands. Abernathy remembers thinking that the

¹⁹ Quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., "The Promised Land 1967-1968," *Eyes on the Prize II Part 4* (Alexandria, VA: Blackside Productions, 1990).

group looked eager, expecting to gain entrance, explaining that he thought “this was their first trip to Washington” and that he needed to console them and explain that this was a typical response and that “they were not being singled out for special abuse.” While waiting in the lobby of the Court for a response, one Indian leader sparked a peace pipe, which circulated for about an hour with no response. The group, fed up with the lack of attention, started a drum circle that escalated into a full-blown display with twenty-five Indians beating on tom-toms and chanting. Surprisingly, the performance received no response. According to Abernathy, “It was as if nothing they did could possibly impinge on this court, with its ancient traditions and its great authority.”²¹ The American Indians held impromptu protest as a response to SCLC’s leadership lack of attention to conducting protests centered on their specific demands.

Like the other groups, the American Indian contingent struggled with the power dynamics within the PPC. Tillie Walker recounts that while Tijerina complained about black dominance in the campaign, she felt that “black people treated us more like human beings than Reis Tijerina and the Mexican group did. They treat us more like equals, because Reis Tijerina came in and decided that he was going to be our leader.” Walker complained that Tijerina had appointed Mad Bear Anderson the leader of the American Indian contingent and told Walker that she was jealous of his leadership. Perhaps gender issues were at play here as well, since Tijerina challenged Martha Grass’ ability to serve as a speaker for the American Indians, even though the group had elected her to the position. Walker reported that Tijerina started screaming at her, calling her a bureaucrat

²⁰ Washington Legal Service Committee, “What to do and not to do IF ARRESTED.” KL, SCLC, 178:40.

and labeled her middle class, but she simply told him he had “no business trying to choose our leaders,” insisting that the group had selected Martha Grass to speak as “a mother of eleven children, as a person who comes from a very poor community, as a person who comes from a community where there was a lot of discrimination against Indian people, and as a person who did a beautiful job of speaking.” Walker explained that she had joined the PPC because it offered people from reservation communities “a chance to speak and say what it was that is wrong with their community, what is wrong at home and hopefully being a part of a larger movement” and was disappointed in all of the squabbling that had occurred. Yet, Walker saw hope in the coalition formed for the PPC and set a precedent for the burgeoning American Indian Movement, declaring,

. . . this is just the beginning. We have never been involved in anything larger than our own groups. In fact, just maybe except for attending Urban Indian Conference, which there are a lot of tribal groups, tribal groups really working together and this is the first time.²²

The Chicanos and the American Indians had joined forces for the demonstration at the Supreme Court. Between four or five hundred participants protested to guarantee American Indians’ fishing rights and protest the Court’s upholding of the sentences of twenty-four Indians.

Former Assistant Secretary of HEW, Ralph K. Huitt, recounts how he and Secretary Cohen handled another one of these impromptu visits. Cohen planned to have Huitt and Assistant Secretary Simpson meet the group down the street and appoint twelve to fifteen people to meet with Secretary Cohen for a public meeting, with the press

²¹ Abernathy, 520.

²² Tillie Walker Interview.

allowed to be present. As Huitt recounts, “Mr. Cohen was sure that where he did not want to be at that point was in an auditorium full of those people.” When two young men leading the group confronted Huitt demanding to speak with Secretary Cohen, Huitt consulted the Justice Department who advised him that this was “a militant group without leadership and we won’t answer for what happens.” Huitt recounted that at this point Hosea Williams, who he described as “a first grade leader who understands exactly what he’s doing and has as many skills in dealing with a group of people as anyone I’ve seen,” appeared and took control of the situation. Williams explained that the people were not going to allow just a handful of people to meet with the Secretary. Huitt remembers his inexperience dealing with this type of situation and commented on his relief that the group of poor people were amicable. He recounts:

They were not hostile, they were in good humor, and although they were kind of rough acting, this was because this is the way they are. But not at any time did I feel in the slightest degree in hazard. Never when they gave me the thumbs down and booed me and said, sit down, did they do it in bad spirit. It always was with laughter and good humor and that kind of thing.²³

The protests not only provided participants with access to their elected officials, they also enabled them to feel the freedom and exhilaration—the fun—that comes with protesting. While Huitt supported the campaign, he criticized its leadership for constructing demands that were “pretty much over the heads of the people,” as well as the ever-revolving door of leaders for the various ethnic groups participating. While the PPC’s goals might have been in constant flux and articulated in “middle-class” terms, poor people understood what they were lacking and what they needed.

²³ Ralph Huitt Interview.

On June 11, the PPC's leadership announced revised goals for the movement. Marian Wright was hired to reshape the goals and articulate them in terms that would resonate with legislators. The Committee of 100's visits to government agencies and the daily protests allowed the participants to express their demands in their own terms, but SCLC leaders felt that in order to sway Congress the PPC needed policy experts who knew the language of Washington lobbyists and legislators. In addition to issuing a few specific demands of each government department, most of which were scaled back from the Committee of 100's original proposals, the PPC listed its legislative priorities.

Topping the list was passage of the Clark Emergency Employment Bill and the pending housing bill, as well as the repeal of the compulsory work requirements of the 1967 Social Security Amendments, which was a central concern for NWRO activists. But other demands seemed a bit weak; for instance, they asked only to maintain rather than increase the level of appropriations for school lunch and breakfast programs and other poverty programs. Additional demands included the passage of legislation guaranteeing collective bargaining rights for farm workers, increasing appropriations for food stamp and commodity programs, and retaining the Javits Amendment, which had freed \$227 million for food programs for the fiscal year. The list concluded with the PPC's original central demands, "legislation providing a guaranteed income as a matter of right for those who cannot or should not work" and legislation that would "insure that every American citizen will have a decent job at decent wages and a decent house at reasonable costs."²⁴ While the demands were reasonable, they were not radical enough to

²⁴ Statement of Rev. Ralph Abernathy on Goals of Poor People's Campaign, June 11, 1968, KL, SCLC, 122:11.

satisfy all of those in the multiracial coalition of poor people, and Rustin left out most of the other minority groups' demands.

That same day Reies Lopez Tijerina, leader of the Alianza de Pueblos Libres of New Mexico and one of the primary leaders of the PPC's Mexican American contingent issued a press release that attempted to challenge "basic assumptions on which the Southwestern United States has been ruled for 120 years," which had made the "Indo-Hispano (Spanish-American, Mexican-American)" what Tijerina called "a subject people," explaining that "only theoretically have they been extended the full rights of U.S. citizenship guaranteed to them in the peace of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of May 1848." The press release made comparisons between the situation of blacks and that of Latinos in the Southwest, arguing that both groups had been "the source of cheap labor, the targets of racial abuse and persecution, and in the case of their land rights, the victims of fraud and outright theft." Tijerina, based on his experience in New Mexico fighting for recognition of Mexican land grants, made the issue of land the focal point of the Mexican American contingent, while echoing other demands common to all the participating groups.²⁵

June 12 was a busy day for the PPC. Approximately sixty women went to Capitol Hill to protest Legislative Hearings on the use of U.S. property for camping purposes to encourage the Congress to allow the encampment on the Mall to remain indefinitely. Meanwhile, labor leaders were in Resurrection City to talk to residents, while yet another group held additional protests at the Department of Agriculture. After a full day of

²⁵ Press Release, Poor People's Campaign, Mexican-American Contingent, June 11, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:10.

protesting, SCLC leaders hoped to have participants awaken at 4:00 a.m. for a mass march. The Attorney General's office reported that four males had left Resurrection City headed towards the Agriculture building "wearing white head bands and playing bongo drums." Others decided the middle-of-the-night march was a good idea. The government agents reported that thirty-three left Resurrection City at 2:14 a.m. followed by another fifteen people at 2:38 a.m. At 4:36 a.m. on June 13, approximately one hundred-fifty people circled the Agriculture building, marching "to the beat of bongo drums." This display went on for about an hour and a half, when demonstrators stopped marching and congregated on the north side of the building. An additional group joined the protest the next morning around 8:30.²⁶

While about a hundred participants remained at the Agriculture building where Abernathy planned to have a press conference in the afternoon, other participants organized to demonstrate at the State Department. Just before 11:00 a.m. on June 13, Reies Tijerina led between fifty and sixty people from Resurrection City to the Lincoln Memorial where the group swelled to about a hundred as they headed to the State Department. The groups demanded included the following:

- 1) That an impartial committee investigate the validity of the Treaty Guadalupe-Hidalgo;
- 2) That an immediate executive order be given setting priority to the Spanish language and culture on all levels in the Southwest;
- 3) That all the land grants confiscated be returned immediately;
- 4) That compensation be given to the immediate needs of the victims; and

²⁶ Daily Log, June 12-June 13, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library. While the PPC was launching a full blown assault on the Department of Agriculture, SDS was holding their annual convention at Michigan State University in East Lansing and prepared to have a massive demonstration on June 14 in front of HEW, led by Paul Gonzales.

- 5) That cases pending in courts directly related to the land question against the individuals be withdrawn on the grounds that the treaty is a defective document.²⁷

When the group arrived and were told that Dean Rusk would not meet with the contingent because they had not confirmed their appointment, Chicano leader Corky Gonzales reportedly called the security officer a “fascist pig.” Participants established a picket line to protest Rusk’s response. Tijerina demanded a meeting with Rusk and ninety-nine other poor people, as well as full press coverage of the encounter. Meanwhile, Jesse Jackson had rallied another fifty people to join the group still at the Agriculture building. Jackson indicated that the protesters would divide up and block all of the entrances, threatening to move on enter the building, as guards stood by at each entrance.²⁸

The action continued the next day as four buses of Puerto Ricans arrived from New York to join participants for a June 14 Puerto Rican march on Washington. Along with this march, Hosea Williams led over two hundred people back, yet again, to the Department of Agriculture.²⁹ Along with these protests, SCLC had arranged for a Government Employees Fast Day Committee to present funds collected for the PPC at a ceremony at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Pavilion where the lunch money that would have been spent that day was donated to the PPC. SCLC leaders also tried to raise money with Abernathy and Sterling Tucker hosting a reception for business and labor supporters of

²⁷ Press Release, Poor People’s Campaign, Mexican-American Contingent, June 11, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:10.

²⁸ Summary, June 13-14, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

²⁹ Summary, June 15-16, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

the PPC and pro basketball stars played a benefit game for the PPC at Howard University, raising two dollars for each spectator.³⁰

Another focal point of June 14 was the Mexican American contingent's march on the Office of Education. The group declared that they were protesting the "inadequate and racist school systems in this country" and were demanding that the government withhold "federal funds to those school systems employing teachers, curriculum, and textbooks which distort and/or omit the history, contributions, and language of the Mexican-Americans." Additional demands included "compensation for the psychological destruction to the identity of the Mexican-Americans by having available to all children a completely free education from Headstart through college," as well as "a completely bi-lingual education and protection of the cultural rights as guaranteed by treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo." Other demands focused on community control, demanding each neighborhood have its own school board "with no at-large membership," and that teachers live in the communities in which they teach and are capable of providing comprehensive bilingual education of Mexican American history and culture. After issuing the final demand—"the preservation of our values, culture, and family life"—Corky Gonzales explained that while these demands were specific to Chicanos that the all of the other groups represented in the PPC shared similar demands for a free education, "a complete overhaul of the existing sterile decaying educational system." The group also called for more abstract demands such as "a cultural renaissance: a redevelopment and revitalization of the creative talent of all youth," and "a stress on humanity and correction of the dehumanizing system now in practice." Gonzales

³⁰ Schedule, Friday, June 14, KL, SCLC, 179:9438

concluded the visit with a warning that if the Office of Education failed to meet these demands that consequences might include a national boycott of school systems.³¹

Assistant Secretary of HEW, Ralph Huitt, praised the group, declaring his admiration for the fact that this group of poor people was “under firm leadership and they trusted their leaders. They were making specific demands they understood, and which could be negotiated. They had confidence in their own people who happened to be in the government,” unlike other groups who chastised those from similar backgrounds who worked for the government as sell-outs.

The protest at the Office of Education demonstrated the Chicano Movement’s growing emphasis on education and cultural affirmation as a means of obtaining political power and fostering group pride. The Chicano contingent at the PPC presented their demands on behalf of the Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC) and its dramatization of these issues through protesting the commencement proceedings at San Jose College until its graduates, presidents, and faculty “participate in Mexican-American liberation schools,” which would feature courses on Chicano history and culture.³² The faculty of the liberation schools would include the burgeoning roster of Chicano scholars, such as Dr. Roman of UC Berkeley, Dr. Cabrera of San Jose State, as well as activists, such as Sophie Menoza of UPA, Bert Corona of MAPA, Al Juarez of UMAS, Dave Santos of the Brown Berets, Corky Gonzales of the Crusade for Justice, Sal Candelaria of the Black Berets, Sonny Madrid of New Breed, and Cesar Chavez of the UFW. MASC

³¹ Statement Office of Education, June 14, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:10.

³² Press Release, June 14, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:10.

also demanded that a Chicano Institute and Cultural Center be established by the fall semester.³³

Rafael Duran led another contingent of PPC participants that referred to themselves as the “Indio-Hispano” people, to meet with Dean Rusk at the State Department. The group issued their demands as representatives of:

the people known by the following names: Mexican-Americans, Spanish-Americans, Latin Americans, also La Raza, Chicanos, Hispanos; who occupy most of the Southwest and whose intermarriage with the indian blood dates back to Oct. 19, 1514, forming thereby what we feel: A new breed of Hispano background.

The group’s presentation began by outlining the abuses the U.S. government had committed against their people, followed by a list of demands to rectify these wrongs. The group rooted their complaint in the violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed February 2, 1848, which ended the U.S. war with Mexico, enabling the U.S. to acquire the modern-day Southwest and all of its inhabitants. The Indio-Hispano contingent insisted that the U.S. government had violated the treaty, which the group reminded “relates, embraces, protects, and guarantees the rights, privileges, and immunities of all Mexican, Spanish, and Indian Americans to their and land and culture.” The Chicano activists insisted that their people’s “bitter experiences of the last 120 years proves in word, in deed, and in documentary evidence that we have been the victims of an organized criminal conspiracy to take our land by the Federal Government” in violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which was upheld by Article 6, Section 2 of the Constitution. The group declared that these violations had kept the Indio-Hispano “in an underdeveloped condition creating thereby a psychological retardation.” While

³³ MASC Demands, KK, SCLC, 179:10.

this characterization mimicked elements of the culture of poverty theory, the group squarely placed blame on the U.S. and state governments rather than on the poor people themselves.

After presenting their grievances and declaring that it was their duty to petition their government for redress, the group presented their demands to the Department of State and all other government institutions involved with the land and cultural rights of the Indio-Hispano people. The overarching demand was for the State Department to establish a presidential commission “to investigate every issue emanating from” the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.³⁴ The first demand emanating from the Treaty mimicked the demands at the Department of Education, calling for an executive order to guarantee a bilingual education from kindergarten through college that represents “the true history and culture of not only the Spanish-speaking but other minorities who have built this country as well.” The other demand responded to the issue of land grants throughout the Southwest that white settlers and the U.S. government had violated. The group demanded “the immediate return of all property to the ipso-facto pueblos, settlements, villages, posts, villas, and other governmental and political bodies whose power and communal lands were held in trust by the Indio-Hispano.” The group insisted that property rights included all of the resources the land produced, such as water, timber, minerals, and grazing rights.³⁵

³⁴ A fact-finding commission was an important first step because government officials were completely uninformed when it came to this significant yet neglected piece of U.S. history. When the Committee of 100 met with the Department of Interior to present their initial demands, the government officials present had never even heard of the Treaty. See chapter three.

³⁵ Demands of the Indio-Hispano to the Federal Government, KL, SCLC, 179:9.

The PPC was an outlet for all kinds of burgeoning Chicano movements and provided a place where regional leaders could coordinate their efforts. Reies Tijerina used the PPC as a forum to introduce another one of his programs, the Poor People's Industrial Project. Sensitive to Congress' tight purse strings, Tijerina's plan began with a disclaimer that, "no government handouts are required to implement this project. Only the cooperation and recognition of government within their usual or unusual channels of operation are sought." Tijerina proposed that he could provide between 1,500 and 1,700 jobs in the Southwest by producing "a completely natural and organic soil amendment" that "cannot be equaled by any other fertilizer in this or any other country." Tijerina argued that not only would this program provide thousands of low-skill jobs for impoverished citizens throughout the Southwest, the program would also "be a major contribution to the solution of world agricultural and food problem." He declared that the program's soil amendment—which was called Vida-Gro and contained a mixture of bacteria organic matter, humus, humic acid, and other trace materials—was the only thing that could repair the twenty-five percent of U.S. farming land that had been over-farmed, and encouraged the government to allow the program to provide ten percent of the 200 million dollars spent on fertilizer each year. Tijerina reiterated that this program could benefit not only the nation's poor, but might also play a central role in eradicating poverty worldwide, noting the irony of the U.S. poor feeding the poor in other countries.³⁶

³⁶ He quoted the president's State of the Union address from the previous January in which he declared that, "the time for rhetoric had clearly passed. The time for concerted actions is here, and we must get on with the job." The proposal concluded with a detailed business plan and

The Chicano and American Indian contingents used the PPC to give exposure for their local and regional movements. Both groups were frustrated with SCLC's leadership and many told Tom Houck that they would have preferred to remain separate from SCLC and live at the Hawthorne school. Houck explained that the other minority groups believed if they stayed in Resurrection City SCLC would have complete control over them. Houck explains how SCLC "set the people up there and you housed them, you fed them, you practically told them when to demonstrate and when to live. You were becoming the government and the people would begin rebelling against you."³⁷ To make matters worse, Hosea Williams, whose authoritarian dramatics rivaled those of Tijerina, was in conflict with other groups' leaders throughout the PPC.

The stalling tactics SCLC leaders had devised to boost participation for Solidarity Day was another sore subject with other groups and the press. While Abernathy made repeated threats to "turn this country upside down," and SCLC staff promised to stage "a lie-in on one of Washington's major streets" and "a walk-around inside one of the big department stores" or to block the entrances to federal buildings and cut off bridges,³⁸ few acts of mass civil disobedience occurred because SCLC's leadership did not want to disrupt the plans for Solidarity Day. Abernathy had met with seven senators and agreed to discourage acts of civil disobedience, betraying his late friend's original goal for the PPC in exchange for Senator Philip Hart's (D-MI) promise to create a biracial committee of fifteen to seventeen senators who would "confer weekly with

explanation of the partners already involved in producing the product. See *Poor People's Industrial Project*, KL, SCLC, 179:10.

³⁷ Tom Houck Interview.

³⁸ "The Scene at ZIP Code 20013," *Time*, May 24, 1968, 29.

Abernathy and his lieutenants.”³⁹ The question was whether private meetings with government officials and large displays of interracial unity would lead to better anti-poverty programs, or whether the mass civil disobedience of thousands of poor people disrupting the status quo would force a reluctant Congress to act.

SOLIDARITY DAY

While participants joined for daily protests and PPC leaders attempted to simultaneously run a city and lead these protests, little planning had been done for the intended showcase for the PPC, Solidarity Day. In mid-May, the SCLC leaders decided to postpone the big event, originally scheduled for May 30. Abernathy recognized that he and his staff could not take on any more responsibilities, so he called on movement veteran Bayard Rustin, the primary organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. Abernathy explains that while Rustin knew better than most how to mobilize for a big march like they were planning, “with less than two weeks to go, he was causing more problems than he was solving.”⁴⁰ The troubles began on June 2 when Rustin issued a revised list of the PPC’s demands, many of which were similar to the original set of demands the Committee of 100 presented but were articulated in more moderate terms. Journalist Charles Fager insists that the revised list of demands was “hailed by editors and liberal politicians as an important refinement of the Campaign’s sweeping rhetoric into concrete, attainable objectives that could be fitted into conventional political bargaining processes.”⁴¹ While this description might have fit government officials, white liberals, and the press’ goals for the PPC, it belied the radical vision Dr. King had

³⁹ “The Scene at ZIP Code 20013,” *Time*, May 24, 1968, 29.

for the campaign and complicated SCLC leaders' efforts to form a broad multiracial coalition of radicals and moderates.

Rustin's revised demands were issued without the approval of Abernathy or other SCLC staff and ignored the war in Vietnam, as well as the specific demands for recognition of land grants and fishing rights that the Chicano and American Indian contingents had reiterated throughout the campaign. Andrew Young suggests that it was the intended focus on hunger that frustrated Rustin who, Young insists, "argued that the campaign should address the causes of poverty," which Rustin identified as unemployment and low wages, rather than symptoms like hunger.⁴² He had issued his own anti-poverty program on May 6 in an address to the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith titled, "The Anatomy of Frustration," which proposed several specific goals that were necessary to "deal with white fear and Negro frustration," responding to the recent riots and the intensifying white backlash. Rustin proposed a two-dollar minimum wage, with government subsidies for small businesses that could not afford that wage and a guaranteed income for those unable to work. He also called for a massive public works program, demanding that during World War II "we did not ask if people were too black, or too old, or too young, or too stupid to work. We simply said to them this is a hammer, this is a tool, this is a drill . . . We can find a peacetime method for doing this" that he insisted "would benefit not only the poor but also the affluent." Unlike SCLC leaders, Rustin had a plan for where the money should come from, insisting that the programs he outlined would cost \$18.5 billion a year, which he proposed could be drawn from the

⁴⁰ Abernathy, 522.

⁴¹ Fager, 62.

gross national product,” which would rise as more people were working rather than ending up “in prison or on welfare.”⁴³ Unfortunately, the seeds of frustration were planted and rather than combining the two agendas, launching a comprehensive assault on both the causes and symptoms of poverty and maximizing Rustin’s skill and experience dealing with Washington’s officialdom, egos got in the way.

Abernathy was facing challenges to his new found authority from every angle—his staff, other PPC groups’ leadership, the press, the government, and now Rustin. While Abernathy had always been King’s closest friend and confidant, the older and more seasoned Rustin was used to being King’s advisor rather than being told what to do by lower level SCLC leaders. Rustin probably assumed he needed no authority to issue the demands. After squabbling with Abernathy for a few days, Rustin was fed up and quit the PPC, which Fager insists led to an even worse relationship with the press and days of bad headlines for the PPC “after the leadership’s rejection of what the press had regarded as an important contribution.”⁴⁴ Abernathy quickly replaced Rustin with Sterling Tucker, Director of Washington’s Urban League.

In a matter of ten days, Tucker and his staff pulled off an impressive task, organizing an affair with crowds that were estimated to include somewhere between 50,000-100,000 people. Thankfully, nature worked with the PPC for once and Tucker did not have to deal with any more rain. The mood was not calm, though, as the city’s law enforcement, 500 police reserves, and over 1,000 National Guardsmen stood ready in

⁴² Young, 487.

⁴³ Bayard Rustin, “The Anatomy of Frustration,” in *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise, ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003).

case a riot were to occur.⁴⁵ Along with the all-day event in Washington, SCLC had called on local affiliates throughout the nation to ask their governors or city administrators to proclaim June 19 as “Solidarity Day,” ask their ministers or rabbis to offer special prayers for the campaign, and to ask employers to allow workers time off so they could travel to Washington to demonstrate support for the PPC. SCLC provided potential marchers with information on how to obtain transportation but explained that each group would have to fund its own way there and back.

Since people from all different backgrounds and political persuasions would be participating in the march, the National Committee limited the use of slogans to those the Committee had designed, which included the following options: “I Have a Dream . . . One America”; “All Rights For All People”; “End Hunger in America”; “Jobs Or Income For All Americans”; “I Am a Man” (originally used in the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ March); and “America! Why Not Now?” The only pointedly anti-war statement was “End the War And Save the Cities.” If participants wanted to use additional signs, they had to seek approval in advance from the National Mobilization Office. PPC leaders only planned to provide water and bathroom facilities and encouraged participants to bring their own lunches—one for midday and one for supper—that consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, fruit, a brownie or cake, and a soft drink. In addition to these instructions, the National Committee insisted that this was to be a one-day demonstration and that all visiting participants should arrive and

⁴⁴ Fager, 63.

⁴⁵ Memorandum From Lawrence K. Bailey, Conference on June 17, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

leave that same day and were advised not to bring children under fourteen. Marshals were prepared to serve as the security force for the big event.⁴⁶

The day was to consist of three parts: entertainment at the Sylvan Theater on the grounds of the Washington Monument between 10:00 a.m. and noon, hosted by Ossie Davis; the march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial; following the march, there would be an extensive program of songs and speeches made by campaign leaders and invited guests. While the PPC had developed an unsavory relationship with the press, due in large to the unpredictability of the campaign thus far, Solidarity Day was intended to be the campaign's big media event, so SCLC established press tents on the Monument grounds and at the Lincoln Memorial.⁴⁷

On "Juneteenth," a wide range of activists joined forces and prominent entertainers performed as part of the Solidarity Day program, held on the African American holiday marking the anniversary when the last group of slaves in Texas learned of their emancipation. Civil rights historian Gerald D. McKnight proclaims that the campaign's highlight was "the last large demonstration in the nation's capital during civil rights-era America" and declares that the event "came off without a hitch."⁴⁸ SCLC had invited all of the presidential candidates, including Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, Eugene McCarthy, and Harold Stassen, but only the latter two appeared at the event. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, President Emeritus of Morehouse College, and Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, SCLC leader and pastor of the Canaan Baptist Church of Christ in New York City presided over the afternoon affair, while Rabbi Jacob Philip

⁴⁶ Solidarity Day March Manual, KL, SCLC, 180:2.

⁴⁷ Plan for Solidarity Day, KL, SCLC, 180:2.

Rudin, President of the Synagogue Council of America gave the invocation, and Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle, Archdiocese of Washington delivered an additional prayer, representing all of the major Judeo Christian traditions. Following the singing of "The Star Spangled Banner," the crowd then joined in a round of the civil rights classic, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the lyrics to which were printed on the program followed by a brief statement from the march's organizer Sterling Tucker.

SCLC's Director of Non-Violence, Rev. James Bevel delivered the first speech of the day, outlining the purpose and goals of the PPC. A wide range of speakers participated in the day's events, producing a broader coalition than the primarily biracial crowd at the 1963 March on Washington, an event that this march is constantly measured against. Representatives of each of the groups involved in the PPC participated, white activist Peggy Terry of JOIN Community Union; Johnnie Tillmon, National Chairperson of NWRO; Gilberto Gerena Valentin of Home Towns Puerto Rico; Reies Tijerina of Alianza de Pueblos Libres; and Martha Grass, representative of the Ponca Indians of Oklahoma. Speakers also included representatives of labor groups, such as Cleveland Robinson, President of the Negro American Labor Council and Walter Reuther, President of the United Auto Workers. All of the top civil rights organizations were represented, with Dorothy Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women; Roy Wilkins, Executive Director of the NAACP; and Whitney M. Young, Executive Director of the National Urban League all appearing on the program.

After SCLC's Vice President Rev. C.K. Steele offered another prayer, the PPC's National Coordinator, SCLC's Rev. Bernard Lafayette and Chicano leader and head of

⁴⁸ McKnight, 129.

the Denver-based Crusade for Justice presented the citizens of Resurrection City for the crowd to see. Andrew Young then delivered a tribute to the late Dr. King followed by Mary Gurley's rendition of "I Trust in God." Coretta Scott King, listed on the program as Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a speech followed by a selection from the phenomenal gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. Rev. Joseph Lowery, Chairman of the Board of SCLC introduced the organization's president and the PPC's top leader, Rev. Ralph Abernathy.⁴⁹

Abernathy began his speech by invoking the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, knowing that the press and the public would make comparisons between the two events, and reminding the audience of the message his "dearest friend," Dr. King, had delivered in his legendary "I Have a Dream Speech." Abernathy reminded the nation how King "told America plainly that she had defaulted on her promise to Black America for 200 years," a part of the speech rarely replayed each MLK Day. While Abernathy was not the orator King was, his speech was as radical as any made by King in the last years of his life. SCLC's new leader took on the Johnson Administration head on, illustrating the limits of the 1964 and 1965 civil rights legislation and lambasting Johnson's "unjust, immoral, and tragic escalation the war in Vietnam," insisting that it had led to "the disintegration of the coalition of conscience which had given us that small measure of progress that shone as a light in the darkness." He demanded that the cynicism that was rising in the inner cities that had produced massive riots resulted from the frustration of unfulfilled promises, declaring that the "promise of the Great Society was burned to ashes y the napalm in Vietnam," insisting that the Johnson Administration

⁴⁹ Solidarity Day Program, KL, SCLC, 180:2. 450

was responsible for serving as “the unwitting midwife at the birth of a sick society.” Abernathy declared that the PPC was “a desperate effort to help America save herself” from this sickness, insisting that Solidarity Day was not the end of the PPC but a beginning.

Having established the ways the government had failed poor people, Abernathy turned to the accomplishments the PPC had made during its first six weeks. The first success, according to Abernathy, was that the PPC had “brought to the attention of the country—more vividly and more effectively than ever before—the plight of the poor in America” by forcing the nation to see “the terrible and shameful spectacle of children starving while a nation diets.” Abernathy then detailed the PPC’s repeated demands on each of the targeted government departments demonstrating how the movement’s persistence had paid off. First he chronicled the repeated confrontations with Orville Freeman at the Department of Agriculture, the main focus of the daily protests:

We went to Mr. Freeman at the Dept. of Agriculture and demanded that the hungry of this nation be fed. At first he told us he was doing everything he could. But we kept after him. And after a while Mr. Freeman found some money and bought some food so poor people will get more help from the commodity program. We kept the pressure on. And Mr. Freeman found he could move a little faster. So by August 1 there will be a food program in every one of the thousand poorest counties that did not have food programs on June 1. We pushed some more. And the other day Mr. Freeman went and asked Congress for more money for food stamps. We’re going to keep after Mr. Freeman, too—until he spends 227 million dollars he has been sitting on to feed poor people and until he makes food stamps free to people who can’t afford them.⁵⁰

Abernathy went through a similar refrain with each government agency that was failing to meet the needs of the poor. He recounted how Mr. Harding of the OEO told the PPC

the department had no money but “suddenly found 25 million dollars they didn’t know was there,” that would be spent on enrolling thousands more students in Head Start and providing more money for emergency food and health care. HEW promised that they were in the process of revising complicated welfare applications and were considering abandoning the invasive “man in the house” rules that had deprived thousands of families assistance, but HEW official Wilbur Cohen would not pledge to repeal the compulsory work programs for mothers, so Abernathy insisted “we’re going to keep the pressure on until he changes his mind.” The movement planned to do the same to Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz, who had promised the day before to create 100,000 new jobs by January, but the PPC demanded quicker results. Other departments made vague assurances for some of the movement’s mandates but failed to address bigger, more controversial issues. For instance, Housing and Urban Development promised not to move any poor people for urban renewal programs until adequate housing was made available but ignored the rest of the PPC’s demands. Secretary of State Dean Rusk pledged to work on the Mexican American land disputes, but Abernathy insisted that, “Secretary Rusk should know that all of this is secondary to ending the war in Vietnam.”⁵¹ Both the activists and the government knew that there was no way to wage a war abroad and truly combat poverty at home. There simply were not enough resources to do both, and the PPC sought to force the nation’s conscience to abandon the chaotic and unjust war in Vietnam and

⁵⁰ “Address prepared by Rev. Dr. David Abernathy, President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Solidarity Day march in Support of the Poor People’s Campaign, Washington, D.C. June 19, 1968,” KL, SCLC, 180:2.

⁵¹ Ibid.

combat the domestic problems that had set the nation's inner cities off in riots over the past several summers.

Abernathy also listed some of the responses to demands specific to the Mexican American and American Indian contingents explaining that the Justice Department had pledged to enforce rules “prohibiting green card farm workers from being used to break strikes” and that the Department of Interior had declared it was going to accelerate its efforts to develop community-controlled schools for American Indian youth. In addition to these responses from government agencies, Abernathy reported that the Administration had made “new and renewed commitments to seek legislation to help the poor—welfare reform, better food programs, full funding of the poverty program, a new housing bill, collective bargaining rights for farm workers, and many more.” The PPC’s top leader declared that all of these measures were due to the efforts of the participants who had “shown this government that the poor are there, that the poor can make themselves heard, that the poor are silent no longer,” challenging the culture of poverty’s representations of the poor as idle and helpless.

After detailing the needs of individual groups represented in the PPC, Abernathy turned to the broader, national issues facing the poor and reiterated the need for better food, housing, jobs, income, health care, education, and more fair treatment in the justice system. The PPC’s leader recognized the friends the campaign had made in Congress but called out the names of senators who he was sure were not present, since they had adamantly opposed the PPC from its outset.⁵² Abernathy concluded his speech by

⁵² These included Senator Eastland, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee; Allen Ellender, member of the Senate Agriculture Committee; Richard Russell, Chairman of the Armed Services

invoking a higher power than Congress, calling on nation to perform their moral and religious obligation to help the poor, declaring,

I see nothing in my Bible about the riches of the world or this nation belonging to Wilbur Mills or Russell Long; nor do they belong to General Motors, the grape growers in California, the cotton kings in Mississippi, and the oil barons in Texas. But I read in my Bible that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and there is no need of God's children going hungry in 1968.⁵³

Abernathy concluded by warning the government that he did not care if the Department of the Interior granted SCLC an extension for Resurrection City. He was bound to a higher power, declaring, "I received my permit a long time ago, and I received it from no government, from no Constitution, but from God Almighty," insisting that he would remain there until "justices rolls out of the halls of Congress, and righteousness falls from the Administration, and the rough places of the agencies of government are made plain, and the crooked details with the military industrial complex become straightened."⁵⁴

While he tended to downplay SCLC's religious roots while forming the multiracial coalition of poor people, Abernathy invoked his faith repeatedly throughout the Resurrection City stage of the PPC. After Abernathy's rousing speech, the incomparable Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, performed the hymn "Beams of Heaven As I Go," which was followed by a litany from SCLC's most charismatic leader, Rev. Jesse Jackson.

Jackson lambasted the Congress for appropriating out of a total of \$157 billion over \$108 billion to the war in Vietnam and only \$19 billion on Health, Education, and Welfare, which he explained was, "69.9% for killing and 12.2% for healing." Jackson declared,

Whereas this is ridiculous and we will no longer have our sons used for gun fodder in the gun barrels of heathenistic warmongers. Instead of military power to kill, and economic power to enslave, and political power to disenfranchise—

Committee; Congressman Mendel Rivers of the House Armed Services Committee; Wilbur Mills of the House Ways and Means Committee; and "Senator Byrd of West Virginia and Mr. McMillan of South Carolina—the men who control the destiny of the District of Columbia."

⁵³ "Address prepared by Rev. Dr. David Abernathy, President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Solidarity Day march in Support of the Poor People's Campaign, Washington, D.C. June 19, 1968," KL, SCLC 180:2.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

with steady persistence and determination we offer SOUL POWER, an expression of our internal toughness and capacity to endure and not submit to tyranny and oppression.

From there Jackson outlined all of the waste Congress had made of available funds, inserting a call and response “Soul Power,” in between each refrain. He condemned Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman for “returning over \$208 million in unused funds to the U.S. Treasury while America’s first citizens, the Indians, starved on the reservations set aside for them as a memorial to a destroyed people,” and exposed that the Secretary planned to return another \$227 million in unused funds in just eleven days while “migrant farm workers wither away midst their toil in the fields of America’s rich harvest, Soul Power.” Jackson chastised South Carolina Congressman J.L. McMillan of the House Agricultural Committee, who he accused “conspires with his immoral colleagues to grant the 1% of his constituency over \$5 million in farm subsidies while over 54% of his constituents live below the poverty line and receive only \$1.3 million for food, Soul Power.” The young minister and activist’s skill at igniting a crowd was at this point unmatched by any of SCLC’s other skilled orators, and this speech signaled Jackson’s future as a major force for civil rights. The crowd concluded the festive day with a round of “We Shall Overcome,” closing with a benediction from Rev. John D. Bright of the First Episcopal District A.M.E. Church of New York City.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Solidarity Day Program, KL, SCLC, 180:2. He reported that in Texas a small group of less than two thousand farm operators had received over \$413 million in farm subsidies not to grow crops while over 300,000 people living below the poverty level relied on less than \$8 million for food assistance to survive. Mississippi’s Senator Eastland, a frequent recipient of attacks on egregious subsidies, was called out since according to Jackson he individually received “over \$211,000 in federal funds for not growing crops on his Sunflower County plantation, while over 68% of the families in his county are poor, and only 26% of those are fed by the Federal Food Programs, Soul Power.”

Solidarity Day was not the last protest of the PPC. Campaign leaders managed to get the Department of the Interior to extend the park permit for the site on the Mall for another week. Now that the big highlight had passed, there was no reason to prevent mass arrests, but the numbers in the Resurrection City had dwindled to around two hundred participants. The FBI reported to the Attorney General's office that PPC leaders planned "to carry out provocative non-violence to initiate arrests . . . Massive disobedience is planned, and there is no intention to vacate the city." At 2:25 on June 21, the FBI reported that "Chief Mad Bear and Montoya" were "in full Indian garb" were "talking to Pomeroy" in the Attorney General's office, with an additional sixty to sixty-five participants led by American Indian leader Hank Adams, "mostly Mexican-Indians" standing outside the Justice Department. The group was told that they needed to direct their complaints to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, so a group of twenty participants headed over to the BIA building only to find that officials had dismissed their employees early, releasing them by 3:00 so that the building could be locked before the group arrived.⁵⁶ While these government officials derailed this protest, PPC leaders planned to escalate the assault on Washington to a level that could not be contained by locking people out of a building.

King's original goal for the PPC was mass civil disobedience throughout the city that would bring Washington's functioning to a halt, forcing Congress to respond to the needs of the poor. The FBI reported that SCLC planned to intensify the protests, targeting not only government agencies, but also "air, bus, and train facilities. Street traffic will also be obstructed. Poor people will not leave D.C. until Congress enacts the

⁵⁶ Daily Log, FBI, June 21, 1968, Attorney General's Office, Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

demands of SCLC.”⁵⁷ While SCLC had yet to demonstrate this level of militancy, they did hold the Agriculture building hostage yet again, camping out at each of the building’s entrances so that, in the words of Jesse Jackson, they could “prevent Secretary Freeman from conducting regular business until he gets down to the real business of feeding the poor.”⁵⁸ While the numbers at the Agriculture building dwindled to the teens at times, the group did remain overnight. This protest would be the last major action that would occur while participants lived out their final days in Resurrection City.

Philip Buskirk reported on the new pieces of legislation the PPC had helped produce. Buskirk felt that the PPC had an unquestionable effect on several congressmen. He reflected,

I think it is very difficult to evaluate and experienced politicians are probably sort of unemotional, but I think there is no question that many individuals in Congress have been personally touched by their actually meeting people from their district or from other districts who are in situations that they just didn’t believe existed. I think there has been a breakthrough, as far as the human contact goes between a person who has been living in miserable shape and people that represent them in Congress. The other thing is a growing realization, I think, of a movement towards some kind of unity by poor people which means voting strength, which has not been in existence before and on top of that, what appears to be an overwhelming response by non-poor people to this movement.⁵⁹

Buskirk recounted the generosity participants encountered from people all across their journeys to Washington and from people in the D.C. area who had donated food, clothing, even their homes for the participants’ benefit.

In addition to these broader accomplishments, Buskirk insisted that the PPC had contributed to three key pieces of legislation. One was a bill John Conyers, Jr., of

⁵⁷ Daily Log, FBI, June 21, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Phillip Buskirk Interview.

Michigan introduced called the Full Opportunity Act, which included items that provided for an income maintenance program, a guaranteed employment agency in the Labor Department, housing expansion and reform, and better enforcement of equal opportunity legislation. Another important piece of legislation was the Clark Manpower bill, which would create more public service jobs, and the third was a new bill Congressman Ryan of New York introduced for income maintenance. While Buskirk recognized the significance of these pieces of legislation, he insisted that he thought the PPC was a “deeper than just a legislative bill of particulars . . . We didn’t come here to Congress saying pass this bill or pass that one. We came here to say look at some new values and change your approach to all your legislation.”⁶⁰ While Buskirk felt like the PPC had accomplished a great deal, opponents of the PPC were more skeptical of its effects. One of the most frequent targets of the PPC, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, chastised the PPC for “going for things that aren’t true and getting off on a tangent,” exclaiming that activists could be “militant without being screwball and a good bit of this frankly was just screwballed and undisciplined, and the result, I think, unbalanced. The so-called Poor People’s March, I’m afraid could hardly be described as a success.”⁶¹ While the press and the government characterized the PPC as a failure, the participants viewed the campaign in a different light.

Participants seemed to enjoy both Solidarity Day and the daily, and sometimes nightly, protests, and some remarked that they even enjoyed their time in jail. Augusta Denson reflected on her oldest daughter’s experience with the PPC, recounting how “she

⁶⁰ Phillip Buskirk Interview.

⁶¹ Orville Freeman Interview.

was in the march and things, and she'd get arrested, and we'd have to go bail her out of jail, but she really enjoyed it."⁶² Bertha Burres Johnson recounts how her children had similar attitudes towards both protesting and the consequences of direct action:

We got a chance to go into town. We was going to eat some watermelons on the Capitol steps, but they wouldn't let us do that. So we got arrested and they took the children to juvenile. And my children just fell in love with that place. They didn't want to go. They just loved that place.

In fact, the kids liked the place so much, especially compared to the wet and muddy conditions in Resurrection City, and asked if they could stay for the rest of the week. Burres Johnson spent three days in jail herself waiting to see the jury. Although she was not as enthusiastic about it as her children, she reflects, "It was alright. They fed us well. They had conversation with us."⁶³

Along with the thrill of protesting, participants also gained a sense of accomplishment from confronting their government. Denson recounts participating in the siege on the Agriculture building led by Hosea Williams and how they "started to complaining and marching and make speeches." She explains that the protests were sometimes intergenerational, but often "during the evening time we'd march, after they (the youth) marched during the day." Denson insists that while the PPC "may have been a failure to some people, but it wasn't to me." She expressed the sense of accomplishment she felt knowing that, "The good Lord worked on their mind. And that's what did it. With Jesus and us marching and us letting them know that we are all God's

⁶² Augusta Denson Interview.

⁶³ Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author. While these women and their children did not mind going to jail briefly for protesting, Ernest Austin explained that the white Appalachians were much less willing to do so, insisting, "They do not understand going to jail." See Ernest Austin Interview.

children.”⁶⁴ Denson felt that the daily protest were effective simply for the recognition the participants received since the nation typically ignored the poor who were seemingly invisible, trapped in inner cities or isolated in rural pockets of poverty.

While these women enjoyed their experience with the PPC, others felt let down by the promises the PPC’s leadership had made. One man called the PPC “a cruel hoax,” insisting that all the movement did was “confirm to white America that they had been taking care of business . . . go tell the white establishment that . . . they have been persecuting us, they know damn well what they’ve been doing all these years.” Yet another man countered, arguing that the PPC was “the most important event of 1968” because it forced “America to make poverty an acceptable living reality in this country,” and was a useful “lobbying technique.”⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

The daily protests, perhaps more than any other aspect of the PPC, empowered the participants, providing them with the opportunity to directly confront those officials they held responsible for their problems. Their demonstrations challenged stereotypes of the apathetic poor, as well as characterizations of the multiracial group as immersed in conflict. While the coalition was tenuous at times and each group struggled to make their place and have their demands heard, each ethnoracial group supported the others’ demands. Solidarity Day demonstrated that SCLC was still able to turn out large crowds of people from a wide range of backgrounds in one of the largest, single-day demonstrations of the era. The protests prior to Solidarity Day were not militant, but they

⁶⁴ Augusta Denson Interview.

were creative, and they set a precedent for other movements. The PPC had an ever-changing list of specific demands, but both Resurrection City and the daily protests accomplished the movement's primary goal—making the poor visible and showing the nation that poor people wanted to transform their own lives.

The following chapter will consider whether the participants' performance upon the stage of Resurrection City transformed Americans' ideas about poverty from the popular stereotype of a cyclical, pathological state of "hopelessness and helplessness" to an understanding of the poor as a dignified group of people struggling to survive. Some leaders envisioned the shantytown as a model society, but most thought its purpose was to expose the conditions that poor people endure and demonstrate their will to change their situation, challenging the notion that the poor were apathetic. The following chapter will explore the ways in which the PPC's occupation of the National Mall affected both the reception of the campaign and how the poor, rather than gaining the sympathy of these groups, became the target of attacks.

⁶⁵ Transcript of National Educational TV, *Black Journal*, Vol. 7, Ralph Bunche Oral History Project, tape # 76.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Complications of Claiming Sacred Space: Media Coverage of the PPC and the Fall of Resurrection City

“Officials rarely welcome prophets into the town square. The U.S. government could claim to fight a war against poverty as long as the victims of the war tactics remained out of sight. The truth proved to be too dangerous for the comfortable in the capital.”¹

-Linda E. Thomas

“Poor people are victimized by a riotous Congress and welfare bureaucracy. Lawlessness against persons exercising civil rights continues. The insult of closed housing statutes is preserved and sanctified by white society. Flame-throwers in Vietnam fan the flames in our cities. Children are condemned to attend schools which are institutions of disorder and neglect. The lives, incomes, the well-being of poor people everywhere in America are plundered by our economic system. No wonder that men who see their communities raped by this society sometimes turn to violence.”²

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The visionaries who established Resurrection City had very different ideas about what the temporary shantytown was supposed to represent. Abernathy’s goal for Resurrection City was to create a model society, but others saw the shantytown as a display of poverty and all of the hardships and complications that come with it. He insisted that the City would show the public “how to live with each other in their own cities . . . simplifying existence to the point where everyone could understand what was truly important and what was merely irrelevant and inconsequential.”³ While Abernathy hoped that the participants would be models of morality, the media’s focus on internal squabbling shifted attention from the problem of poverty to the problems the multiracial coalition faced. Yet, Abernathy insisted that the participants “believed deeply and firmly that they had come to find a better life, and they took the idea of their own City on the

¹ Linda E. Thomas “The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968: King’s Dream Unfulfilled or Unfinished” in James Echols, ed., *I Have A Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 22.

Hill quite seriously. For the first times in their lives, they were to have their own homes and own street addresses” on pathways named after movement veterans, such as King Boulevard, Abernathy Street, Fanny Lou Hamer Drive.⁴

While Abernathy had notions of creating a model City on a Hill, most of the PPC’s leaders from the beginning intended to use the site on the National Mall differently. King had envisioned the PPC as a mass demonstration of civil disobedience. The city’s architect insisted that Resurrection City embodied King’s goal simply owing to its location. According to Wiebenson, the City served as a symbol of confrontation: “put up seventeen blocks from the Congress it was meant to confront, and even closer to most of the agencies and departments appointed to serve the country.” Positioned between monuments to two “men who have become symbols of the conflicts most felt in the American past,” Wiebenson described the City’s site on the Mall as an “isolated focal point”—“an area of grass and trees” where tourists braved “major roads bearing heavy traffic” to photograph the monuments and the poverty protest.⁵ SCLC’s Andrew Young agreed with Wiebenson’s perspective and had warned the press that the PPC was “not going to be a Sunday-school picnic like the 63’ March on Washington.”⁶

The shantytown’s location in the space between two of the nation’s most revered monuments—the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument—meant that Resurrection City was built on what most of the nation considered national, sacred space.

² SCLC Press Release, “Dr. King Calls For Action Against Poverty and Racism Cited in Riot Study; Poor People’s Campaign Starts April 22 in Washington,” March 4, 1968, KL, SCLC 122:10.

³ Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 503.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 512.

⁵ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 1-2.

While using the hallowed ground of the National Mall should have demonstrated the seriousness and sanctity of the poor people's cause, chapter eight argues that the location of the City contributed to its demise and to the media's disparaging coverage of it throughout its existence. In their introduction to *American Sacred Space*, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal define sacred space as "ritual space, a location for formalized, repeatable symbolic performances . . . of controlled, 'extraordinary' patterns of action" that "embody perfectly the way things 'ought to be.'"⁷ They argue that while embodied rituals can help to consecrate a sacred place, they may also work to desecrate sacred space, which is how many interpreted the PPC's occupation of the National Mall. Chapter eight demonstrates how the participants' use of such nationally revered space contributed to the perceived failure of the PPC. An exploration of the negative press coverage of the PPC, the government resistance to and attempts to dismantle the campaign, and the public's apathy towards the display of poverty reveal how the choice of a nationally symbolic site negatively affected the already struggling campaign. The muddy pit that Resurrection City eventually became and its residents offended the white middle-class sensibilities of most Americans who interpreted the shantytown as perversion of nationally revered space. Chapter eight recounts the fall of Resurrection City and explores the protests that occurred after the city's demise, as well as SCLC's plans for prolonging the PPC. While the press maligned the PPC, the chapter will consider how participants and leaders interpreted the effects of the PPC. While the occupation of the National Mall negatively affected the media and the government's

⁶ *Newsweek*, May 6, 1968, 30.

⁷ Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space*, 9.

assessments of the movement, participants and leaders focused on the multi-racial coalition the movement produced and the potential of the PPC as a model for future movements.

MAKING A PLACE OF PROTEST

The National Mall—the broad stretch of pristine lawn that stretches alongside the Reflecting Pool from the Capitol to Fourteenth Street, from the Washington Memorial to the Lincoln Memorial—has played and continues to play a central role in our national consciousness. The National Coalition to Save Our Mall refers to the Mall in the twenty-first century as “our premier symbol of American cultural values.” This group formed to protect the symbolic space from the ever-expanding number of memorials and advertisements, as well as the increasing barriers created by amplified surveillance, which they argue are defiling the space.⁸ The publishers of a retrospective on the Mall in Washington—concur, referring to this space as the “most important symbolic space in the United States.”⁹ While the Mall has been consistently revered, this space’s meaning has transformed throughout history, as has the reception of those who make use of it. From 1791 until 1894, the nation’s capital complied with its designer, Pierre Charles L’Enfant’s, intended use for the land as “a grand ceremonial space.”¹⁰ But beginning at the turn-of-the-century, the capital, and the Mall in particular, transformed from a site of celebration and rituals into a place of protest.

⁸ See <http://www.savethemall.org/> (accessed September 12, 2005).

⁹ Richard Longstreth, ed., *The Mall in Washington, 1791-1991* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991), back cover.

¹⁰ Lucy G. Barber, *Marching On Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Press, 2002). See also Longstreth, *The Mall in Washington, 1791-1991*, 9.

On May 1, 1894 a group of around 500 men joined Jacob Coxey, determined to march down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol and demand that Congress put an end to the suffering of the unemployed and initiate a massive public works program to build new roads. Although both the government and the media characterized the protest as an invasion, this group of men, which called itself the “Commonweal of Christ” but was popularly referred to as Coxey’s Army, would initiate a new use of the capital. As historian Lucy Barber exhibits in *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition*, these men initiated a transformation of the capital from a site for celebratory events and the law and order of government, to the property of the people—space that all Americans could claim and use to demand their rights, a process which Barber argues transformed the American people’s relationship with their government.¹¹

In 1932, a group of WWI veterans, who called themselves the “Bonus Expeditionary Force,” expanded the potential and practice of marching on Washington by camping out for over two months along the Anacostia River, outside the city limits, in a makeshift tent city, which at its peak had 25,000 residents. The media labeled the group the “Bonus Army,” demonstrating that many Americans perceived the tent city just outside the capital as an invasion. The veterans lobbied for immediate payment of their wartime bonuses, rather than in 1945 as the government had planned. Due to rumors that the movement was Communist-led and reports of violence and mayhem in the camp, on July 28, 1932 President Hoover ordered future WWII generals, General Douglas MacArthur, Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Major George S. Patton to forcibly evacuate the camp. Although Congress finally met the veterans’ demands in 1936 when

¹¹ Barber, 12.

they passed a lump-sum bonus of \$2.5 billion over Roosevelt's veto, the money came late, and the WWI veterans felt betrayed.¹² Thirty-six years later, thousands of poor people joined forces to reenact this radical social protest, but this time the group would build their encampment in the heart of the capital on the sacred space of the National Mall.

The site's significance and visibility was heightened after the 1963 March on Washington produced a successful display of interracial solidarity and nonviolence. Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech, delivered on the Mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial, is memorialized each year as the nation celebrates King's birthday as a national holiday. Both King's image and the representation of this event have been sanitized and distorted,¹³ a revision that occurred as soon as the more radical PPC attempted to use the Mall as the site of its temporary shantytown. The 1963 March on Washington's use of the Mall set a precedent that the PPC challenged, and the government did everything in its power to mediate the effects of having Resurrection City on the Mall.

As King and others warned from the beginning, the PPC would not have the celebratory tone of the earlier march. Instead, King envisioned the anti-poverty crusade as a massive display of civil disobedience. In *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, cultural geographer Don Mitchell suggests that while many scholars have focused on the need to produce public space, few have studied groups that

¹² John Henry Bartlett, *The Bonus March and the New Deal* (Chicago: M.A. Donohue & Co., 1937), and Roger Daniels, *The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1971).

¹³ See chapter two.

actively *take* it.¹⁴ Following in the footsteps of Coxey’s Army and the Bonus Army, this multiracial coalition of poor people occupied one of the most symbolic national spaces in an attempt to sway the nation’s conscience and compel politicians to wage a genuine, effective war against poverty. The purpose of Resurrection City was to claim a space with power, use it to dramatize the plight of the poor, and, hopefully, gain respect for the participants. Instead, the thought of thousands of poor people occupying the National Mall scared the hell out of Congress, discouraged tourists from visiting the capital, and disheartened some spectators at home.

RESISTANCE FROM CONGRESS

Before the PPC even arrived in Washington, the press and government officials expressed their concerns over the movement entering the nation’s capital. Headlines read “Poor March on Washington: a City Braced for Trouble,” “Washington’s Racial Jitters,” “Threat of Anarchy in Nation’s Capital.” While the press predicted problems, Congress went to inordinate lengths to try to prevent the PPC from occurring and bracing themselves once the movement was on its way. *Washington Post* reporter Charles Fager’s journalistic account of the PPC, *Uncertain Resurrection*, describes a city under siege as the poor people’s caravans began to arrive. He explains that the “heavily Southern-oriented white Washington region felt surrounded, with dynamite at its center and fuses sputtering towards it from all directions.”¹⁵ Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia opposed the PPC at every stage and worried about how its presence in the

¹⁴ Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: The Guilford Press).

¹⁵ Fager, 30.

nation's capital would affect popular perceptions of the city and the government.¹⁶ Even those who supported the Campaign's goals, such as Illinois' Republican Senator Charles Percy, proposed that the location should be changed, suggesting: "Let us have a march, by all means. But why not turn it around and have its route run from Washington to where the poverty is, instead of from where the poverty is to Washington?"¹⁷

Representative Wayne Aspinall of Colorado invoked the Bonus Marchers eviction from Washington, insisting, according to Andrew Young, that, "poor people had even less right to come."¹⁸ Arkansas' Senator McClellan declared the PPC "a premeditated act of contempt for and rebellion against the sovereignty of government," warning that he had information of a militant plot to overtake the campaign.

A *Newsweek* explained the source of the officials' fears regarding the PPC. The article, while chastising the city's officialdom for their hysterics, recognized the significance not only of the space the PPC occupied on the National Mall, but the effect the campaign was having just by being in the nation's capital:

Ridiculous it may have been, but Washington's mass anxiety attack was palpably real. For all its place as the world's most powerful seat of government, white Washington is still a provincial border town with a Southern exposure and an enduring apprehension about its burgeoning black majority.¹⁹

The city was still reeling from the riots that swept the D.C. area and the nation in the wake of Dr. King's assassination. Obviously, law enforcement and political officials throughout the nation wanted nothing to do with the PPC. In order to feel in control once the Department of Interior decided to grant SCLC the park permit, the government kept a

¹⁶ *News and World Report*, May 20, 1968, 72.

¹⁷ *The Washington Post*, April 23, 1968.

¹⁸ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 484.

minute-by-minute watch on all aspects of the movement and kept 8,000 Army, National Guard, and Marine troops ready at all times in case an insurrection were to occur.²⁰

RESISTANCE FROM THE WHITE HOUSE

While Congress feared the invasion of thousands of poor people, LBJ reportedly interpreted the campaign as a whole as a personal affront. Civil rights historian Gerald McKnight insists that the “thought of an encampment of the nation’s underclass sprawled out within the shadow of the Washington Monument, according to Johnson’s attorney general, ‘hurt him—deeply hurt him.’” Ramsey Clark became the PPC’s biggest advocate, arguing that the government had to respect the people’s right to protest and recommended that negotiation with campaign’s leaders might prevent more violent and chaotic outbursts. Presidential assistant Matt Nimetz supported Clark’s approach and distributed excerpts from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s *The Crisis of the Old Order*, which detailed President Hoover’s disastrous eviction of the Bonus Army. The Attorney General’s Office coordinated all negotiations between the PPC and other government agencies in order to ensure smooth relations. Clark’s moderate approach angered many politicians who were determined to prevent the PPC’s presence in the capital. McKnight reports that some even referred to the Attorney General as “’Ramsey the Marshmallow.’”²¹ While Clark took a practical approach to the PPC, Congress, the

¹⁹ “Washington’s Racial Jitters,” *Newsweek*, June 3, 1968, 27.

²⁰ “Civil Rights: A Talk With the Lord,” *Newsweek*, June 3 1968, 45. Another article in the same edition reported on the Mule Train, which was reportedly “getting considerably more hospitality in segregationist Dixie,” yet the same article reported that a Mississippi state trooper muttered, “‘All we wanna do is get these niggers out of here.’”

²¹ McKnight, 110-111.

president, most of his cabinet, and even the press were resistant to this multiracial movement of the poor.

THE PRESS

In addition to the problems of such a dismissed and degraded group occupying nationally symbolic space and the exaggerated fear of the government, the national and local press quickly developed an unsavory relationship with PPC officials, particularly the young and brash marshals. The display of poverty promised to deliver good press and be the biggest show in town, appearing on all the major television channels nightly news and in the headlines of many of the nation's newspapers and magazines. Many national media outlets were based in Washington, so they were simultaneously functioning as both local and national correspondents covering the movement. Eight to ten reporters from each of Washington's newspapers covered the PPC twenty-four hours a day.²² Journalist and civil rights scholar Richard Lentz argues that the Washington-based media perceived the PPC as a threat. He insists that David Lawrence, editor of the Washington-based *US News and World Report* feared that the campaign would get too big and become chaotic and violent.²³ Before Resurrection City was even built, journalists began disparaging the PPC. *The Washington Evening Star* reporter Richard Wilson suggested that the PPC "was poorly conceived from the beginning. Its objectives are not clearly spelled out. Its potential for harm is probably greater than for good," and predicted that, "the methods chosen to dramatize the needs are likely to have the opposite effect."²⁴

²² McKnight, 114.

²³ Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 290-291.

²⁴ Richard Wilson, *Evening Star*, May 1, 1968.

According to *Washington Post* reporter Charles Fager, who covered the PPC throughout its duration, SCLC's indecisive plans frustrated the press from the early stages of the campaign. Fager recounts how SCLC leaders "kept up the suspense by touring the Mall to look over likely campsites and at the same time expressing no interest in applying for a permit to use the land decided on." After the permit was finally issued on May 10 and the participants began to arrive to build Resurrection City, the PPC's relationship with the press quickly soured. The friction between the movement and the media resulted in the production of a negative first impression and a continuous focus on the campaign's tribulations throughout its duration.

As the opening ceremonies took place and caravans began to arrive with buses full of participants, reporters and photographers swarmed to get shots and news of the diverse crowd. Fager explains that trouble developed when PPC marshals confronted the press:

Young men who called themselves marshals began barking orders, first to the marchers not to talk to the press, and then at the press to go away and stop taking pictures. The photographers were a little surprised, but shrugged it off and went on shooting; reporters likewise paused, then moved back in. But the marshals were insistent and hostile, intercepting and squelching any attempted interviews, stepping between the photographers and their subjects.²⁵

The PPC's park permit stipulated that U.S. Park Police were not allowed to enter Resurrection City. The marshals took that principle and extended it to anyone they wanted to keep out, restricting the press' access to movement on the Mall. Some marshals treated the press with a lack of respect, cursing at the journalists, taunting them, and restricting their access. Fager explains that the marshals' actions "came as a sharp

²⁵ Fager, 34.

surprise to the reporters covering the camp. It was not at all like SCLC to treat them this way; before, Dr. King and his staff had always worked hard to keep the press on their side.”²⁶ Journalist Mary McGrory responded to marshals’ brash gestures in “‘Oppressed’ Adopt Tactics of the Oppressors,” suggesting that the black youth were responding in the same manner law enforcement treated them.²⁷ These attacks against white liberal reporters fostered a sense of betrayal among journalists who probably considered themselves progressive and well meaning and who were accustomed to having SCLC’s leadership court the press rather than ostracize it.

Andrew Young suggests that the press was not only hostile to the PPC but also ignorant of SCLC’s history and philosophy. As Young explains,

The press had apparently made up its mind to condemn the Poor People’s Campaign and Resurrection City long before we arrived in the capital. The Washington press in particular didn’t know anything about the civil rights movement, and even the black reporters were surprisingly unfamiliar with our philosophy and history. With few exceptions, reporters were interested only in dirt-digging—unearthing the internal conflicts, disputes, and backbiting from our sea of mud. There was no real interest shown in the issues we were attempting to elucidate. When physical examinations we provided revealed that a large number of people were suffering from medical problems, the press saw an ‘epidemic,’ not the deeper truth that poverty and health problems go hand in hand. It was as if the doctor who discovered a cancer was blamed for it.²⁸

The society was steeped in the culture of poverty theory, and the Washington press corps was obviously not immune to the power of its rhetoric. Abernathy also complained about the national press’ negative coverage of the PPC. He concurred with Young that, “even at the beginning their stories were skeptical and ironic,” which he insists had not been the

²⁶ Fager, 37.

²⁷ Mary McGrory, “‘Oppressed’ Adopt Tactics of the Oppressors,” *The Washington Evening Star*, May 14, 1968, A4.

²⁸ Young, 483.

case with SCLC's major southern campaigns.²⁹ The SCLC veteran attributed the location of the protest as central to the press' negativity towards the campaign, declaring, "I believe their cynicism came from the fact that we were in the nation's capital, where belief and optimism were always in short supply."³⁰ Abernathy explained that once the press "decided that nothing was going to come of our efforts" they devoted their attention to "more militant black leaders who were providing them with inflammatory rhetoric and an occasional bombing or killing to liven up the evening news." While Abernathy blamed the press for focusing on more radical black power leaders, the press had its own problems with SCLC's new leader.

Along with this confrontation and many more with the young and brash marshals, the press was also frustrated with Abernathy's inability to keep to his own schedule. Fager also implies that SCLC's new leader, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, did not live up to the press's expectations and could not fill his predecessor's shoes, recounting how he appeared two hours late wearing "a Levi jacket, no shirt, and a carpenter's apron" and "still looking exhausted."³¹ Yet many comparisons the press made between King and Abernathy were largely issues of style rather than substance, commenting on his unpolished manner and country upbringing compared to King. While the national media tended to support King, some local media attempted to paint him as a communist and

²⁹ While local southern newspapers were typically hostile to civil rights campaigns, the national media played an integral role in documenting the violence southern law enforcement and white citizens enacted against civil rights activists and helped sway the nation's conscience to address discrimination and racial violence. Sasha Torres demonstrates how television's coverage of civil rights activism fostered a mutually beneficial relationship between the burgeoning media form and the social movement. See Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

³⁰ Abernathy, 514.

expose him as an adulterer. Abernathy faced similar accusations. An organization called “Let Freedom Ring” based out of Staten Island sent out a telephone “services message” that lambasted the PPC as “a full scale Communist-endorsed invasion by professional agitators and Black Power villains masquerading as ‘poor people’” and quoted a documentary about the movement in Selma that accused Abernathy of having “seduced a fifteen-year-old member of the church congregation.” The group promised that next week they would report on “the pro-Communist background of Ralph Abernathy, who would lead the American Negro on a one-way trip to racism, anarchy, and Communism.” The public could either contact “Let Freedom Ring” for the recorded message or send twenty-five cents for a transcription of their message about “the suppressed facts on Abernathy.” On June 24, the PPC’s Chief Counsel Leroy D. Clark sent the transcript to Abernathy and other various SCLC officials asking whether to sue the organization for libel.³²

Another article from an unidentified paper included an article titled, “Abernathy’s Whole Life is Evil,” that detailed Abernathy’s supposed affair with the fifteen-year-old girl, providing more details of the affair, which the paper rumored resulted in Abernathy being chased down the street by the girl’s husband, who “some say, inflicted a good size cut across the reverend’s bare buttocks.” In addition to trying to expose Abernathy’s personal indiscretions, exclaiming that the minister had “the morals of a jackass in heat,” the paper also chastised Abernathy and other civil rights leaders for maintaining their middle-class niceties while grassroots activists endured harsh conditions:

³¹ Fager, 35.

This has been one of the things about all this civil rights stuff which has irritated white people. Every one of these Negro leaders, from Martin Luther King on down, have traveled, eaten and slept in style through campaign after campaign, while their troops bedded down where they could and half the time didn't have enough to eat.³³

The paper accused King of having marched with southern blacks for a few miles on the Selma March but would often "return to his motel in town." The critique was a legitimate one and one that participants echoed, but one wonders if whites leading a backlash against the black freedom struggle were not more concerned with the movement's potential for disrupting the power structure rather than whether or not some black leaders had trouble abandoning their middle-class style during protest campaigns.

The majority of the media's coverage of the PPC lacked the vitriolic tone of these critiques, but the press' negative first impression of the Campaign combined with a paranoid Congress and a scared population in D.C. almost ensured that the masses at home would see the movement as a failure. James Bevel told the press that they were welcome in Resurrection City and invited reporters to "talk to the people and find out why they're here. But give people in this camp the same respect you'd give to Luci, Lynda, and Lady Bird."³⁴ But the press grew increasingly frustrated with campaign leaders and felt that they were not being given the respect and professionalism they deserved. When Bernard Lafayette appeared late for a press conference, a NBC senior correspondent stood up and lambasted the SCLC official, and demanded with a paternalistic air:

³² Leroy D. Clark to SCLC Communications Center, June 24, 1968, Transcript of "Let Freedom Ring" Service Message, June 19, 1968, KL, SCLC, 49:4.

³³ "Abernathy's Whole Life is Evil," from unidentified newspaper, KL, SCLC, 178:27.

³⁴ Cited in Fager, 39.

“I would hope that in the future when you are going to hold a news conference and you are speaking for the whole Poor People’s Campaign that you would: number one, conduct it on time, and number two, please have the figures or the information at your fingertips; because these people, they’re just not going to stand for it.”³⁵

SCLC’s leaders were ill equipped to simultaneously run a functioning city and carry on daily protests throughout the nation’s capital, much less run a public relations campaign for the PPC. Fager explains that once the decision was made to postpone Solidarity Day and the daily protests could not promise high drama or mass arrests, the press grew not only frustrated but also bored with the PPC.³⁶ The staff was busy conducting a national campaign, and many were taking on leadership positions for the first time and were, therefore, unaccustomed to courting the national press.

During the early days of June the press coverage of the PPC focused solely on the obstacles its leaders faced. Headlines read “For the ‘Poor March’: Detours,” “Turmoil in Shantytown,” “Some Gains for ‘Poor Marchers,’ But Their Troubles Grow,” “Poverty: Courting Trouble.”³⁷ One sympathetic reporter declared in “Washington Runaround,” that the problem with the PPC that no one would “dare to mention is the fact that eliminating poverty in America is something America does not want to do,” since “the problem of structural poverty is the problem of a structure that insures that the poor will be denied access to the means to alleviate their condition.”³⁸ Despite the display of multiracial coalition and the PPC’s constant attempts to link poverty to both race and

³⁵ Fager, 47.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “For the ‘Poor March’: Detours,” *U.S. News and World Report*, June 3, 1968, 47; “Turmoil in Shantytown,” *Time*, June 7, 1968, 28; “Some Gains for ‘Poor Marchers,’ But Their Troubles Grow,” *U.S. News & World Report*, June 10, 1968, 60-61; “Poverty: Courting Trouble” *Newsweek*, June 10, 1968, 30.

class issues, *Newsweek* inaccurately depicted the PPC as a black campaign with only a “symbolic smattering of whites, Indians, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican-Americans,”³⁹ obscuring the larger economic and ideological trends that caused all minorities to have disproportionate numbers of poor. While blacks were numerically dominant, there were approximately five hundred Latino participants involved in the movement, as well as a substantial number of American Indians and poor Appalachian whites. While the representation varied among the different groups involved, the PPC was still the most diverse multiracial movement of the era. Although Resurrection City’s residents were primarily black and there were more black participants than any other group, there was strong representation of all of the other groups mentioned.

While most of the press on the PPC focused exclusively on the campaign’s problems or distorted the movement, some articles did highlight some of the positive stories coming out of Resurrection City. On June 17, *Washington Post* reporter Willard Clopton Jr. reported on Rev. Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick in “A Big, Angry Man Turns Nonviolent.” Kirkpatrick, a member of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, which Clopton described as “a militant Negro group formed to fight southern white racism on its own terms,” had abandoned self-defense and embraced the philosophy of non-violence. Rather than bearing arms, Clopton illustrated how Kirkpatrick had turned to music and poetry, explaining that Kirkpatrick’s “passion spills out now in the form of raw musical poetry and a throbbing guitar sound that recall for his listeners the vibrant presence of the late Huddle (Leadbelly) Ledbetter.” Clopton mentioned Kirkpatrick’s

³⁸ “Washington Runaround,” *Commonweal* (June 14, 1968): 373-374.

³⁹ “What Can You Do for Us?” *Newsweek*, June 3, 1968, 22.

role as the “director of folk culture” for SCLC, but rather than focusing on the programs Kirkpatrick had established at the Many Souls Cultural Center in Resurrection City, shedding light on one of the most positive aspects of the City, the reporter chose instead to describe Kirkpatrick and his accomplishments in detail, reporting that he “is 6 feet 2 and weighs 286 pounds” and detailing his life experiences and how he went from “seeing all white folks as ‘whitey’” after working with SCLC.⁴⁰ While the article shed positive light on one individual working with the PPC, Kirkpatrick was presented as exceptional rather than as a model of how all of the poor could become active in bettering their lives and the lives of others.

In the following weeks, the press continued to malign the PPC. Reports on Solidarity Day constantly made comparisons to the 1963 March on Washington. *Newsweek* declared, “Solidarity Day 1968 was no match for the 1963 March on Washington in numbers or eloquence or pristine clarity of purpose,” yet the magazine’s nostalgia for the “simpler, more civil past,” ignored the economic component of the 63’ march, which called for “Jobs and Freedom,” and erased the radical tone of many of the earlier demonstration’s speeches. While most of the coverage of the one-day event was favorable, it was a brief reprieve from the daily assaults on the encampment. In the same *Newsweek* article, Resurrection City was depicted as “a true-to-life squalor—an ill-housed, ill-fed, self-segregated, absentee-run slum afflicted with low morale, deepening

⁴⁰ Willard Clopton, Jr., “A Big, Angry Man Turns Nonviolent,” *The Washington Post* June 17, 1968.

restiveness, and free-floating violence.”⁴¹ The media continuously focused on any violence and mayhem occurring in or near Resurrection City but failed to make any connection to the wider setting of Washington D.C., which was plagued with violence.⁴²

In addition to having a lack of funds and resources and inadequate leadership to run a city and a national movement, PPC leaders were dealing with a population with problems of their own. The poorest people of a rich nation are bound to be angry and feel they have nothing to lose. Many saw Resurrection City as a place to display this frustration and desperation to persuade Congress to act to eradicate poverty. Civil rights scholar Richard Lentz suggests that, “While serious in numbers and types of offenses, the incidence of crime probably was not much greater than would be expected for any population of that size drawn from the poor,” but he argues that the media’s almost exclusive focus on violence resulted from the fact that “some journalists fell victim to crimes such as robbery,” along with the rude treatment at the hands of the marshals.⁴³ Many PPC leaders saw Resurrection City as an opportunity to display this desperation and use it as a tactic to incite Congress and the President to act.

Abernathy concluded that the negative press resulted from a combination of place and weather. From the point during the first weeks of June when torrential rains began to pour, Abernathy insists that, “Mired in the mud and therefore unable to provide them

⁴¹ “Let No One Be Denied,” *Newsweek*, July 1, 1968, 20-21; for more comparisons between the 1963 march and Solidarity Day, see also “Tough Job for New Leader of Big Protest: Trying to Avoid Violence,” *U.S. News & World Report*, June 24, 1968, 16.

⁴² See “Insurrection City.” *Time*, June 14, 1968; Robert Terrell, “Fragmentation in Resurrection City” *Commonweal* (June 21, 1968): 397; David A. Jewell and Paul W. Valentine “Resurrection City: A Community Concerned by Growing Violence” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 1968; Carl Bernstein, “Resurrection City Wears Out D.C. Officials Welcome” *Washington Post*, June 23, 1968, A10.

with colorful glimpses into Resurrection City home life, we were yesterday's news and last week's headlines."⁴⁴ The mud was one of the more visible problems, but the PPC had other issues that the press tended to ignore. The combination of poor hygienic facilities, the rain, and the dirtiness of camping out for weeks at a time created a stench that the residents of Resurrection City had to endure on a daily basis. Chidester and Linenthal argue that sacred space is sanctified through a process of controlling the purity of the place, often through a system of exclusion of those who might defile it. They argue that the maintenance of purity has been traditionally "associated with the ritualized control of bodily excretions."⁴⁵ It is no wonder that the image of Resurrection City left many feeling that this group of citizens was defiling the sacred space of the National Mall since the participants were steeped in mud for weeks, reliant only on portable latrines and temporary showers, and suffering under stark living conditions. Rather than seeing the humanity of poor people, the mud and stench further separated the poor from the rest of the society, intensifying their status as a permanent "Other." While a reporter from the *New Republic* recognized the juxtaposition between the nation's most powerful and the nation's most dispossessed through the construction of Resurrection City, calling it "the greatest publicity stunt, advertising scheme, propaganda achievement of modern times,"⁴⁶ others argued that it was a complete failure, focusing on the disintegration of the City rather than the problem of poverty. The presence of poor people living in the nationally revered space of the Washington Mall made the nation feel uncomfortable and

⁴³ Lentz, 318.

⁴⁴ Abernathy, 518.

⁴⁵ Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space*, 10.

⁴⁶ *The New Republic*, June 11, 1968, 6.

embarrassed and failed to inspire the sympathy and generosity that they desperately needed.

Resurrection City's architect, John Wiebenson recounts that while bad press dominated the coverage, the attention, good or bad, achieved one of the PPC's fundamental goals. The City made the poor and their conditions nationally visible:

“Newspapers printed many articles about the City's problems with organization and security, and many picture of its rain and mud. They generally concluded it to be a failure. But, perhaps these articles and pictures accomplished one thing that the demonstrators themselves could not do. The extensive coverage made the poor visible to the nation, and the visibility was continuous. The City helped make it possible for it to be understood that poverty can exist in a lush economy.”⁴⁷

But the question remains whether bad press is ever good because if the representations of the poor reinforced the culture of poverty theory, than would people be willing to support social programs to help them?

The Fall of Resurrection City

Along with the complications of running a city and a national movement and facing a hostile government and media, PPC historian Gerald D. McKnight has documented the extensive surveillance and infiltration of the PPC, arguing that the campaign failed as a result of these counterintelligence attacks. Andrew Young's memories of the PPC concur with McKnight's scholarship. He recounts how he suspected that the campaign was infiltrated:

We were also certain that Resurrection City was infested with undercover agents and agent provocateurs. I believe the National Park Services and other government agencies sent in officers posing as poor people, and it was the

⁴⁷ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 21.

infiltrators who kept people stirred up against us inside Resurrection City. For example, there were complaints about the food. Well, for poor people from Mississippi, beans and salami were nothing to complain about, and it was a fairly decent meal. Yet there were those inside Resurrection City who created distractions over food that hampered our efforts to raise the issue of hunger for poor people all over America. And I believe that was the intent.⁴⁸

F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover had launched a massive counter intelligence program against black activist organizations back in the mid-1950s known as COINTELPRO, which had escalated its efforts in the late 1960s. While the Black Panther Party was the primary target of the FBI's program, more moderate organizations were also infiltrated. McKnight provides compelling evidence of the relentlessness of government agencies in disrupting the PPC. Along with the Attorney General's Interdivisional Intelligence Unit (IDIU) and the Community Relations Service Division (CRS) and its RC Squad's round the clock surveillance, the FBI, the capital's Park Police, an elite force from the D.C. police force, U.S. Army Intelligence, and even the U.S. Border Patrol provided agents to monitor the PPC. In late May J. Edgar Hoover issued two orders expressing the urgency of conducting an "aggressive and penetrative investigation."⁴⁹ In addition to these direct orders, Hoover's COINTELPRO program also made more covert plans to infiltrate and disrupt the PPC. McKnight estimates that there were at least twenty informants hired to infiltrate Resurrection City. The informants tried to find damaging information about PPC leaders and disseminated only the most licentious details about life in Resurrection City. McKnight insists that most of the FBI reports depicted Resurrection City as "an unalloyed version of a modern day

⁴⁸ Young, 484.

⁴⁹ Cited in McKnight, 122.

Sodom and Gomorrah” where “wholesale lawlessness, violence, rape, petty theft, and interracial sex described the social order” of the City. Building on decades of racist ideology, the FBI reports fixated on “interracial sex inside the tent city and interracial partying at the Pitts Motel involving SCLC staffers.”⁵⁰ While some of these things might have transpired, it is hard to separate fact from fiction because the FBI produced an active and persistent rumor mill in the encampment.

It is clear that the government played a role in inciting chaos in Resurrection City, but some participants hold the PPC’s leadership accountable for the problems within Resurrection City. SCLC’s New York Coordinator for the PPC, Cornelius Givens, recounts his disgust with some of the things that occurred in the City:

I was very disturbed and disgusted at the stealing, and at the rapings, and at the bullshit because it didn’t have to be that way. You see, if you set the tone initially, then all people come into the city to participate in the campaign would have to follow the tone. If not, they couldn’t stay there. There was no tone set, or the tone that was set was negative, it was unorganized, undirected, you know. It was just chaos. And the mistake was made, I think, from the outset, when gangs, or young men were allowed to do whatever they wanted to do. These young men were dealing with fellows, mainly SCLC people, that are honest and sincere, dedicated and immature. You’ve got immature fellows in SCLC. They don’t know a damn thing about them street corners, or how to deal with them fellows selling wolf tickets.⁵¹

Entrusting the safety of residents to young men who were not trained in nonviolence was one of SCLC’s fundamental mistakes. As one of the teenage boys present in Resurrection City, Booker Wright, Jr., concurs that there was a lot of violence in the City, particularly directed towards women: “a lot of young ladies was abused in Resurrection City . . . come back with children, pregnant . . . That age, we went peeping around in

⁵⁰ McKnight, 123, 129.

⁵¹ Cornelius Givens Interview.

places . . . It wasn't all sugar and cream on either side, but that did happen."⁵² Augusta Denson, another Marks native, recounts that a mentally unstable woman went into her tent on night and kidnapped one of her children. Denson explains, "Some girl who wasn't right, she came in and stole my baby," while someone else was supposed to be watching the children. Denson made friends with a white woman named Josephine who helped her get her baby back.⁵³ PPC leaders and the marshals attempted throughout the City's existence to quell any violence and mayhem, but problems persisted throughout Resurrection City's existence.

After Solidarity Day, tensions in the encampment were at an all time high. Journalist Charles Fager reported that after the celebratory march ended, a group of protesters returned from a late night protest at the Statler-Hilton Hotel where A.D. King and others had been denied service for wearing inappropriate attire—their denim work clothes. Many participants were angry over rumors that a camper had been stabbed by a cop, which later proved false, and began taunting the police who had gathered outside the City to monitor the participants' actions. The police responded by forcing the residents back into the City, while residents retorted by hurling bottles and canned foods at the officers.⁵⁴

⁵² While none of the female participants I interviewed recounted witnessing acts of violence, Bertha Burres Johnson did remember a number of young women returning home pregnant. See Booker Wright, Jr. Interview and Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

⁵³ Although they never met formally, Newbern Rooks, who served temporarily as a Marshal recounted helping look for a woman's lost baby that ended up being found in another tent. Chances are that Rooks was searching for Denson's baby. See Augusta Denson Interview and Newbern Rooks Interview.

⁵⁴ Fager, 86-87.

The June 21 issue of *The Washington Post* detailed the growing number of violent incidents. The front-page lead story reported on another late night exchange incident outside Resurrection City when the Park Police hurled tear gas into an “unruly crowd of rock- and bottle-throwing Poor People’s Campaign marchers” gathered outside the snow fence surrounding the City. In another front-page article titled “Resurrection City: A Community Concerned by Growing Violence,” journalists Dave A. Jewell and Paul W. Valentine cited testimony from Alvin Jackson, a thirty-five-year-old black TV repairman who the paper reported had served as the chief marshal in the City until the previous day when he resigned. Jackson explained to the reporters that, the root of the City’s problems were not the “mud, poor food, rain or lousy homes,” but in the fact that “men are getting tired of coming home from a day’s picketing to find their belongings stolen or their wife raped.” The *Post* article repeated this exact quote again later in the article, focusing almost exclusively on the violence and turmoil in the city, despite Jackson’s pleas to the journalists to present a balanced portrayal of the PPC: “Please, mister, if you put this in your newspaper, don’t just put the bad things. Put in all the good, too. This is a great Campaign and a just one, and it has just goals.” Despite Jackson’s pleas and this brief retort to the damaging representation of the City, the article dwelled only on the PPC’s problems.⁵⁵ Another article on the front-paged demonstrated the negative image of the City might have soured Congress’ mood even further, reporting that a “House Panel Slashes Slum School Aid.”

⁵⁵ The same quotes from Alvin Jackson that are repeated in this article were also cited in other press coverage. See “As the ‘Poor Crusade’ Takes a New Turn,” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 1, 1968, 28

In another section with the headline, “Abernathy Denies ‘Violence’ Charge,” SCLC’s leader countered the journalists’ attacks, explaining that Jackson had never been the chief of security and might have been a government-hired informant. He clarified that Rev. James Orange and Albert Spencer were the heads of the two security forces—the Tent City Rangers and the marshals, respectively, and insisted that this expose was simply an attempt to run the PPC out of town, but apologized to the press for any attacks they endured. Moving away from his original designation of Resurrection City as a model society, Abernathy explained: “We are poor people and possess all the anxieties and aggressive tendencies of the poor all over America. I would say that we have less crime, far less crime, than other poverty areas of comparable size and we have dealt with it without police and without jail.” While Abernathy’s statement might have been accurate, his response to concerns over violent crimes—“We do have some people in the city who have not adequately gone through the stage of self-purification to my satisfaction”⁵⁶—must have seemed grossly inadequate for those who suffered sexual or physical acts of violence. The weak response reflected Abernathy’s detachment from the people in Resurrection City, a common complaint from both participants and the press alike, both of which made constant comparisons between King and Abernathy.

On Friday, June 21, Abernathy held a press conference to clarify the direction of the PPC and respond to all of the reports of violence within the camp. Moving further and further from his ideal of Resurrection City as a model City on a Hill, he declared, “The streets of Resurrection City are not the shady boulevards of Bethesda and Chevy

⁵⁶ “Resurrection City: Its Troubles Continue to Pile Up” and “Abernathy Denies ‘Violence’ Charge,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 1968, A22.

Chase, but the broiling pavements of Watts and the unpaved lanes of Mississippi where poor people have always been locked up by America.” He declared that he would “make no excuse for violence, here or anywhere. It is wrong . . . I do not want the poor people to imitate the lowest form of behavior in a racist society . . . But there is a greater evil than a few outbreaks in Resurrection City.” Despite Abernathy’s efforts to refocus the press’ attention on the real issues the PPC meant to address—“the evil of widespread poverty in America”—the press continued to focus on the licentious details of violence and mayhem, which were too juicy for the press to resist compared to the grim and complex reality of poverty. Abernathy tried to avoid questions about the impending closure of Resurrection City, but by late that afternoon, the Department of the Interior had leaked the news that they had decided to refuse SCLC’s request for further extension of the site permit.⁵⁷

The June 21 issue of *True Unity News* countered with rumors that militant leaders would riot if police attempted to shut down the shantytown. SCLC leaders had negotiated behind-the-scenes with the Justice Department’s Roger Wilkins to ensure a smooth closure of the city and to prevent a potential assault on angry participants who might resist the police. Abernathy promised to have as few remaining participants as possible, while Wilkins agreed to have D.C. police rather than the Park Police responsible for evacuating the camp, since the latter were eager to seek revenge on participants who had taunted and battled with them. McKnight insists that the mood in Resurrection City

⁵⁷ Fager, 102; see also “Resurrection City Permit Won’t Be Extended” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1968, A13.

was so tense at this point that Wilkins had to done a disguise to make it in and out of the City unharmed.⁵⁸

Acts of violence continued through the last few days of the camp. On June 21 several participants' A-frame huts were destroyed when a 300 pound black man ran wildly through the City wielding an axe, until marshals finally restrained him. The following day two patients from St. Elizabeth's Hospital, a mental institution, entered the City and set fire to a phone booth and three vacant shanties before they were apprehended and returned to the hospital.⁵⁹ While there were probably several unstable participants who responded to the City's chaos with acts of violence and others who saw the PPC as an opportunity to hustle, it is clear that the government played a key role in disrupting Resurrection City and ensuring its demise.

The PPC's leaders were well aware of the problems plaguing the city and the low morale among the participants. Friday night they held a mass meeting at St. Stephen's Baptist Church. The featured speaker, Rev. C.L. Franklin, father of the Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin, delivered a rousing speech to what Charles Fager describes as an "unusually boisterous" crowd. Jesse Jackson followed Franklin, declaring to the crowd that the campaign was in full-force, focusing on the occupation of the Department of the Agriculture rather than the demise of Resurrection City. He declared: "Resurrection City is a *temporary* state. I mean, you don't just keep *wallowin'* in the Resurrection—once the Resurrection is established, then you "go ye into all the world." Now we have *had* a Resurrection; it is now time to go *ye* into the world and *stop* ye at the Agriculture

⁵⁸ McKnight, 137.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

Department.’ [Laughter and applause.]”⁶⁰ Journalist Robert C. Maynard echoed Jackson’s sentiment in a *Post* article that would tell “the story about a symbol that turned into a near disaster,” and argued, like many others, that the leadership’s focus had “been diverted from crusading against poverty to grappling with an unwieldy experiment in instant urbanism.” Maynard reported that top SCLC officials had conceded that their focus had shifted from fighting poverty to defending the City and the Campaign as a whole. Unlike the majority of the media coverage towards the end of the City, Maynard recognized that the downtrodden encampment was “not a symbol of hope of the poor, but of their determination to succeed.”⁶¹ Resurrection City was a site of resistance, an occupation of a nationally revered site, a protest of invisibility, and the some of the participants would not let their City go down without a fight.

In the early morning of Saturday June 22, yet another incident transpired in Resurrection City, further heightening the tension in the already dejected camp. At 2:00 a.m. a rumor swept the City that Stokely Carmichael had been assassinated, prompting approximately 150 angry youth to gather at the gate and shout at the police until Abernathy announced that the rumor was false.⁶² As tensions boiled over, Abernathy issued a call on Saturday morning for Sunday, June 23 to be a National Day of Prayer for the struggling campaign. The minister pleaded with “people of goodwill everywhere” to “pray for the purification of our nation, for a rededication to nonviolence, for an end to hunger, and for the preservation of Resurrection City, the symbol of the Campaign.” He

⁶⁰ Fager, 102-106.

⁶¹ Robert C. Maynard, “A Symbol—How It Changed” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1968, A1, A13.

⁶² Fager, 107.

announced that the remaining participants would hold a Spiritual Rededication Service on Sunday at 2:00 p.m. at the Reflection Pool.⁶³ *The Washington Post* reported that Abernathy had called off all protests until Monday, but that the permit deadline would be ignored.⁶⁴ At the Saturday morning press conference, Fager reports that Abernathy staged “a ceremony in which a feather-bedecked Indian, identified as George Crow Flies High, chief of the Hidasta tribe, presented him with a ‘proclamation of temporary cession,’ in the name of the land’s original owners” that would allow the PPC to remain on this symbolic site indefinitely.⁶⁵ At both Resurrection City’s rise and fall, Abernathy made it a point to acknowledge the rape and pillage of the native people’s land and seek their permission of its use, recognizing the Indian custom of treating all land as sacred.

The last days of the City’s existence would prove to be some of its most devastating yet. SCLC reported that on Saturday night between 10:00 and 11:00 p.m. residents witnessed “a Molotov cocktail thrown into the camp site from a car moving along Independence Avenue.” The report indicated that the car was the same light green as the Park Police cars. Later that night around midnight, while a town meeting was in session in the cultural tent, there were reports of minor rock throwing along the fence at Independence Avenue. A half hour later, the Information Office reported that police had begun throwing tear gas canisters directly into the camp while most residents and their families were sleeping:

When the first tear gas was released inside the campsite, residents in the immediate area, including many old women and children, were driven back to

⁶³ Information Office, 6-23-1968, KL, SCLC, 178:31.

⁶⁴ Martin Weil and Carl Bernstein, “Protests Off Until Monday: Permit Limit To Be Ignored, Leaders Says,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1968.

⁶⁵ Fager, 108.

City Hall. Within minutes, as the barrage of tear gas continued, the gas spread over an area covering more than half of Resurrection City. Hundreds of residents were driven out of the campsite. Some were so severely gassed that they had to be hospitalized. Many people sustained minor injuries from falls and collisions as they moved to escape the gas.⁶⁶

Andrew Young tried to persuade the police to cease this assault on innocent, sleeping women and children, but the police disregarded his pleas and threatened to arrest him. Journalist Charles Fager reported that the “women and children in their nightclothes, were routed from their cots and fled coughing and screaming along the Reflecting Pool, across 17th Street and up the hill to the brightly lit Washington monument,” describing the disheveled group as “a pathetic and moving sight.”⁶⁷ While SCLC leaders had witnessed vicious attacks against nonviolent activists in the South and the North alike, they had never seen an unprovoked, spontaneous attack against unknowing, sleeping victims.

Residents were forced to remain near the Washington Monument from 1:30 a.m. until about 3:00 a.m. Sunday morning. Around the time of their return, SCLC staff members witnessed a Park Police car move slowly as it passed the city, and cut out its lights as it approached, throwing bottles onto the grass outside the city’s fence. The Information Office reported that this was “an attempt to plant false ‘evidence’ against the people of Resurrection City.” The report declared in summation that of all the attacks SCLC had witnessed, “none was ever as vicious as this attack on Resurrection City.”⁶⁸ SCLC called for prosecution of all officers participating in the attack, but the government produced a different narrative of what transpired in the wee hours of June 23. The

⁶⁶ Information Office, 6-23-1968, KL, SCLC, 178:31.

⁶⁷ Fager, 108.

Attorney General's office reported that at 12:48 a.m. residents within Resurrection City were "shooting off fire-crackers." Two additional government reports at 1:03 a.m. and at 1:07 a.m. indicated that Abernathy was calming down the crowd in Resurrection City, but the next report at 1:40 a.m. indicated that 200 residents were leaving the city due to "heavy gas," but failed to disclose the cause of this attack or who conducted it.⁶⁹

On Sunday morning, the remaining residents of Resurrection City enjoyed their first hot breakfast and conducted a clean-up campaign before spending the remainder of the day in the Cultural Tent listening to Abernathy deliver a lengthy sermon titled, "The Way Out of a Dilemma." The minister recounted the story of three lepers whose community had left to die outside the city gates and whose only hope is to befriend enemy troops camped in the wilderness. The lepers scare off the troops and are left with their food and valuables, a parable Abernathy thought reflected the plight of the poor, which he had repeated previously while in Washington. While Abernathy was critiqued from all angles, he was a moving preacher. Fager reports that an elderly black woman from Montgomery, Alabama who had known Abernathy since the days of the bus boycott "was moved into what is called a shout. Leaping from her seat, she waved her arms and screamed frenzied hosannas until other worshippers grabbed her and held her in her seat."⁷⁰ Once the Sunday service concluded, and the 8:00 p.m. deadline passed with no action from the police, the residents returned to their huts where they would experience a calm night's sleep, their last in the City.

⁶⁸ Fager, 108.

⁶⁹ Daily Log, June 23, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

⁷⁰ Fager, 111.

While SCLC's leadership knew that their stay on the Mall had ended, they were startled when they learned after midnight that the camp would be evacuated the following morning. Fager reports that the morning of Monday, June 24 "looked like Doomsday."

He describes the setting:

A heavy, dark-gray overcast hung low over the City. The air was hot, thick and hazy, muffling noise of the rush-hour traffic that had been diverted away from the Park. Rain seemed imminent all morning but never came. The Reflecting Pool was still and glossy, the beech trees alongside it unmoving except for a few stray branches, like statues with nervous tics. Lincoln's columns stood pale and spectral against the sky. The plywood of the shanties was wet and shining, mud was once more inches deep. The residents came awake sluggishly, subdued by the atmosphere and their own apprehensions.⁷¹

At 8:30 a.m. Abernathy read a statement declaring that the residents would remain and face arrest if necessary, declaring, "We will honor the permit granted us by the Indians, who hold a more rightful claim to the land than the government of the United States." An hour later, Abernathy led approximately 200 participants through the city and across 17th Street and onto the Capitol, where they would conduct a non-violent protest. Fager reports that residents were told to leave their belongings in their tents because "the government had agreed to identify and store them so they could get them back when released from jail." But as the marchers left, they saw buses and buses of police arriving at the encampment and feared that these promises would prove false. Fager cites Abernathy as commenting that the scene looked "like Russia . . . I never seen anything like that in Mississippi."⁷²

By 10:00 a.m. somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 officers had surrounded the encampment. After repeated warnings, Police Chief John B. Layton ordered the elite

⁷¹ Fager, 114.

Civil Disturbance Unit (CDU) to clear the camp. McKnight reports that the police, “outfitted with crash helmets, flak vests, gas masks, gas guns, and billy clubs,” with every third officer holding a loaded shotgun, swept the city, but found no one in the A-frame shanties and no weapons. While the City was virtually empty, some residents resisted even in their absence. McKnight explains that, “several shacks were booby-trapped and went up in flames when the police forced them to open.” These were not the only acts of resistance. Some of the remaining participants fought back as they were kicked out of their “City of Hope.” Milton Garrett, who helped build Resurrection City, reflects back on the day cops tore it down:

That was a wild day. Of course, there was tear gas. One guy picked up a load of tear gas and hurled it back at the police. It was wild . . . We were real concerned about getting all the elderly people to safety . . . They just threw us out!”⁷³

One black activist engaged with the PPC declared that the campaign should welcome the police’s invasion of their City, insisting that, ““They need a confrontation desperately to bring the movement back to life. An attempt to oust them would create the confrontation they need.””⁷⁴

While Resurrection City took days, even weeks, to build, the evacuation only took about an hour and a half, and only about 150 residents remained in the City when the police arrived. *Newsweek* described how easily the temporary city fell apart: “the jerry-built town came apart as easily as a frontier set on a studio back lot . . . A few hammer whacks and down went the rain-warped plywood huts and lean-tos, exposing the

⁷² Fager, 115.

⁷³ Milton Garrett Interview.

⁷⁴ “‘Poor March’ Showdown Nears—Most Demands Still Unmet,” *U.S. News and World Report*, June 24, 1968, 8.

encampment's seamy artifacts—rag-bag blankets, game-legged army cots, ranks of road-worn shoes.”⁷⁵ While these “artifacts” might have seemed like junk to this reporter, the participants I interviewed all bemoaned the fact that along with forcibly removing the remaining residents, police belied their promise to protect the people’s precious goods and destroyed all of the many needed items participants had gained along their way to Washington when caravans stopped in local communities and from D.C. residents who brought donations to the City site. Like the Bonus Army marchers over thirty years before them, the U.S. government had kicked the residents of Resurrection City, U.S. citizens, out of the capital rather than meeting their demands. Rather than seeing the government as the problem, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Monroe W. Karmin explained that, “the villain in the public’s view have turned out to be the demonstrators themselves,” seeing them not as “the sympathy-deserving downtrodden, but rather that of a bunch of unruly, undeserving riffraff.”⁷⁶

In what, overall, is a rather sympathetic article in *Life* magazine, journalist John Neary compared the encampment to a frontier American boomtown inhabited by the busted. While Neary championed the spirit of the participants and how they “got themselves together,” he insisted that the PPC’s demise was connected to its defilement of sacred space. Neary declared that Resurrection City’s “15 fetid, waterlogged acres were a scar on the picture-postcard beauty of downtown Washington,” and that while “the nation’s ‘invisible’ poor had presented themselves, visibly, audibly, to the American conscience,” many were “annoyed at the hallowed place where they had plopped.” Neary

⁷⁵ “End of the Dream,” *Newsweek*, July 8, 1968, 19.

⁷⁶ Monroe W. Karmin, “A Crusade Collapses,” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 8, 1968, 87-88.

emphasizes the distance spectators felt, comparing their visits to that of “some stuffed anthropological exhibit in a museum or zoo, and the tourists, nervous at first, came through to look and to sniff.” While middle-class Americans were being exposed to American poverty and all the dirtiness and despair that accompanied it, the poor were being perceived as the “Other” rather than as human beings who needed help. The distance Neary describes between tourists and Resurrection City residents was symbolic of the distance between middle-class white America and the m represented “separate nations” within the United States that remained invisible, trapped in inner cities or pockets of rural poverty. Neary championed the participants, declaring that, “by their sheer presence they may have made their case,” and celebrated their efforts “in spite of the fact that it was the wrong time, the wrong place.” Yet, Neary illustrates that it was because of their selection of the National Mall as their site of protest that they received the attention they did:

The poor couldn't be missed. Go to the Lincoln Memorial and you could hear their guitars. Climb the Washington Monument and look over toward the Potomac and there below was this sprawling muddy mess of a shantytown, and you knew these were people who just plain didn't have the dime to take the elevator to the top.⁷⁷

While Neary and others attributed the fall of Resurrection City, others placed blame for the demise squarely on the shoulders of SCLC's leaders.

The City's architect, John Wiebenson, declared that the biggest mistake was not giving participants control over their own city. Wiebenson concluded that while participants were busy building their homes and active in daily protests, they were able to utilize their talents for the betterment of themselves and their new community, but insists

that “an opportunity was lost to use some strong leaders and some strong organizations . . . to use the residents for the benefit of themselves and of the City, too.”⁷⁸ Like the War on Poverty and many civil rights campaigns, the greatest mistake made was not involving local grassroots people in leading movements that directly affect them. Unlike Abernathy who viewed the purpose of Resurrection City as a City on a Hill, to serve as a model society, Wiebenson insists that the City performed a different, although possibly more purposeful function:

If, finally, Resurrection City did not show how people should live, it did show the problems too many have in how they do live. For too many people there is a lack of response in service and security needs. For too many, there is a lack of rewarding chance for involvement, locally (as the two boys making a shelter with windows and bunks) or publicly (as the young Marshal from Chicago who was calming people). What Resurrection City was able to give its people is what, too often, other cities and towns do not. And, for some, for a while, it did give not only food and shelter and medical attention, but challenge and involvement, as well.⁷⁹

The residents of Resurrection City had experienced many benefits during their stay while weathering what for most seemed like unbearable conditions, but the City had never been the intended focus of the PPC, and SCLC leaders were ill-prepared to run the shantytown and too used to being in control to allow the participants run it themselves.

THE FUTURE OF THE PPC

Many of SCLC’s leaders were happy to see the demise of Resurrection City, while others dealt with a new set of concerns once the government destroyed the “City of Hope.” SCLC’s Hosea Williams, an early opponent of the PPC as a whole, told the press that the organization “got trapped down in that mudhole.” Williams declared,

⁷⁷ Neary, “A New Resolve: Never to Be Invisible Again,” 28.

“I want to thank the government for getting us out of it. My talent is in the movement. Now that Resurrection City is gone, we can focus on the real problems—with Congress, for instance—instead of wasting half our energy trying to keep kids from throwing rocks.”⁸⁰

While some of SCLC’s leaders were ready to escalate the daily protests in the capital, others were still handling the logistics of having hundreds of poor people in the nation’s capital with nowhere to stay and no direction from campaign leaders as to what would transpire next.

Anthony Henry explains that once the City was shut down, “there was the immediate influx of people needing various services. And 1401 U Street was selected as the place that they should come to receive these services.” When people began to want to leave town, Henry explains that, “SCLC was not prepared to send people home. And they were coming to the 14th and U Street office demanding tickets home and we weren’t prepared to handle that until a system was set up.”⁸¹ While many individuals did not know where to turn, some caravan leaders had managed to keep up with their group of participants and help find them a way home. For instance, Bertha Burres Johnson was in charge of making reservations for everyone to get back home, or wherever they wanted to go. SCLC provided one ticket away from Washington. She recounts that while some did return home, others used the ticket to go elsewhere and start a new life. Burres Johnson explains that some “went to Chicago, some went to St. Louis, and others went north . . .

⁷⁸ Wiebenson, “An Outline of Resurrection City As Used,” 21-22.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁰ Cited in Fager, 118.

⁸¹ Anthony Henry Interview.

They figured off they'd be better off there.”⁸² While many left quickly after the fall of Resurrection City, others chose to remain in Washington and try to keep the PPC going.

After Resurrection City had been shut down and remaining participants had been forcibly evacuated, Abernathy decided to escalate the intensity of daily protests and use mass arrests to keep the PPC, and himself, visible. Young reports that after “being systematically run out of town by our own government” Abernathy led about three hundred in a demonstration at the Capitol, where he was arrested and sentenced to twenty days in jail.⁸³ Young complained that this protest was “just the last in a series of independent, uncoordinated actions by members of SCLC’s executive staff that contributed to the disorganization of the Poor People’s Campaign,” bemoaning how by that night, “the muddy ground was all that remained of the City of Hope.”⁸⁴ While Young was mourning the loss of the City, Abernathy was trying to stay in the spotlight, even when in jail.

As he sat in jail, Abernathy crafted a letter “From a Jail in Washington, D.C.,”⁸⁵ an obvious attempt to mimic his late friend’s “Letter from A Birmingham Jail.” Abernathy wrote to his “fellow clergymen,” just as King had. Yet rather than chastising white southern ministers who tolerated or advocated segregation, Abernathy called on “ministers of whatever faith” to fulfill their duty “charged in Psalms 82:3-4, to ‘Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy;

⁸² Bertha Burres Johnson Interview with Author.

⁸³ Report to Attorney General’s office, July 10, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark’s Papers, LBJ Library. The government reports that only fifty participated in the demonstration at the Capitol.

⁸⁴ Young, 489.

rid them out of the hand of the wicked.”⁸⁵ Abernathy, once again, framed the PPC as a moral crusade, proclaiming,

I stand guilty of defending the poor, and I cheerfully accept the penalty. For I am with the poor babies who are born with an injunction against their hopes of survival, with the poor children who are hunted down by hunger and disease, with the poor young people who are detained in stifling schoolrooms, with the poor men who are sentenced to unemployment, with the poor families who are convicted in the slums, with the poor old people who are condemned to neglect and want, with all poor people who are finally executed by this rich, greedy society. I am in jail with the poor, and today I ask you to join us. The time for stating our case in words is past we have done that and have been rebuked by the authorities . . . there comes a time when we must act in deeds. Since our society and its institutions of power, notably the Congress, have repeatedly failed to respond to the cries of the oppressed, now is the time to act. We have no power but the power of the act of conscience. I call upon you to come with me and the poor people.

Abernathy called on his fellow clergymen to be in Washington the following day for another march on the Capitol and for waves of additional protesters to follow, insisting that, “Words are no longer sufficient.” Before concluding the letter, Abernathy displayed his current and past arrests as badges of honor, adding to the original text, “Do not be worried about me. I am concerned for the hungry. If I must go to jail to end hunger in America, I gladly go this 20th time, and I would go the 50th and 100th if necessary.”⁸⁶

While Abernathy made a plea to the nation’s ministers to join the PPC and suffer the same fate he was willing to endure, the SCLC Information Center tried to redirect the attention back to the issues the PPC was addressing. On June 26, the Center released a statement insisting that the fall of Resurrection City and Abernathy’s arrest had “obscured three crucial facts,” which were as follows:

⁸⁵ Abernathy had originally written, “From a Jail in America,” but scratched out America and penciled in Washington, D.C. KL, SCLC, 177:2.

⁸⁶ Ralph Abernathy, “From A Jail in Washington, D.C., June 25, 1968” KL, SCLC, 177:2.

MILLIONS OF AMERICANS ARE STARVING.

IN FOUR DAYS, SECRETARY FREEMAN WILL TURN BACK TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY SEVEN MILLION DOLLARS TO THE TREASURY, WHICH COULD BE USED TO FEED STARVING PEOPLE.

Moreover:

--The Department of Agriculture has no plan to institute any food program in over 600 counties where millions of poor people reside.

--Yesterday, by a vote of 26 to 4, the House killed a bill to feed the hungry by providing food stamps for all poor people.⁸⁷

After outlining these offenses, SCLC asked how Secretary Freeman could allow these actions to transpire, holding the Department of Agriculture official personally responsible. The statement charged that, according to SCLC, these actions constituted “a purposeful intent to continue starving millions of Americans.” Like Abernathy’s letter, the Information Center’s statement questioned the morality of a wealthy nation that allowed people to starve, demanding to know,

Where is the conscience of a Nation which rejoices loudly over the destruction of Resurrection City and remains silent while people starve . . . Is this how the conscience of America responds to a non-violent appeal to brotherly love and humanity?

SCLC challenged each of the leading presidential candidates—Humphrey, McCarthy, Nixon, and Rockefeller—to condemn the recent actions and insisted that their silence would be interpreted as an endorsement of Secretary Freeman’s actions. The statement announced that the PPC would begin target their demonstrations against “specific congressmen who voted yesterday against feeding the hungry,” in addition to filing a law suit with the help of the Citizens Advocate Center and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund

⁸⁷ From SCLC Information Center, June 26, 1968, KL, SCLC, 49:4.

requesting that the courts prohibit Freeman from returning the \$227 million to the Treasury since people were starving nationwide.⁸⁸

ESCALATING DAILY PROTESTS

SCLC intended for this stage of the PPC to finally enact civil disobedience that would result in mass arrests. The Attorney General's office reported that approximately 200 participants remained in Washington, with at least fifty still "actively demonstrating." The participants stayed at the Zion Baptist Church, the Dunbar Hotel, and two other locations in northwest Washington. SCLC planned to hold workshops at the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church every Wednesday night to mobilize Washington residents and tried to enlist other groups, such as Women Strike for Peace and the American Friends Service Committee, to help keep the PPC alive.⁸⁹ The Mt. Carmel Baptist Church was also used as a site to process incoming participants who were traveling to D.C. to participate in protests and to be arrested.⁹⁰ Participants were told that before they went to jail they should register with Jim Mock of the Legal Redress Committee. Mock would make note of any special prescriptions or treatments participants might need while in jail, whether they needed glasses or hearing aids, or had any other special medical problems. This Committee informed participants about what services the jail would provide and where to go once they were released.⁹¹

⁸⁸ From SCLC Information Center, June 26, 1968, KL, SCLC, 49:4.

⁸⁹ Report to Attorney General's office, July 10, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark's Papers, LBJ Library.

⁹⁰ "Memorandum From Ennis Francis to Andy Young and Bernard Lafayette, June 26, 1968, Space," KL, SCLC, 49:4.

⁹¹ Information Bulletin from Legal Redress Committee, July 7, 1968, KL, SCLC, 178:40.

While the Department of Agriculture had been the most targeted agency during the Resurrection City stage of the PPC, SCLC began to direct their protests to Congress, leading groups to the Capitol on a regular basis. The day after being kicked out of their homes in Resurrection City, Jesse Jackson led another sixty participants to the Capitol. On Friday, June 28, Hosea Williams led around forty participants back to the Department of Agriculture and then to the Capitol where they joined somewhere between 200 and 400 protesters from the American Friends Service Committee. Fager reports that the Quaker contingent had traveled to Washington from their General Conference in Cape May, New Jersey and formed “a silent, legal vigil line” across from the Capitol grounds. About thirty-five from this group crossed west 1st Street and sat down in a plaza beneath a statue of John Marshall where they held a silent Meeting. While the protest violated Capitol regulations, Fager indicates that at first the police simply took the group’s banner announcing the meeting. But when a group of about forty black PPC participants marched up the Capitol steps, only to find the doors to the building locked, they met police on their way back down. The police proceeded to arrest the black activists while ignoring the equally illegal action of the silent, white Quakers. Frustrated by this blatant display of the police’s racial double standard, Quaker member Ross Flanagan of New York led the contingent of white activists over to the black group once the meeting concluded, displaying unity with the black activists, which resulted in seventy-nine arrests from both groups. The following day, there was another small march to the Capitol, which did not produce any incidents or arrests, and on Sunday June 30, Andrew Young led a group of participants and ministers in a march around the Capitol, circling

the building seven times. Young announced that these marches would be conducted again on the next three Sundays.

On that same Sunday, Andrew Young met with leaders of the various ethnic groups that participated in the PPC to rally support for the continuing efforts in the nation's capital and throughout the country. The government reported that Tijerina planned to remain in the city because his wife was seven months pregnant and the couple did not want to travel until the baby was born but that the rest of the Mexican American contingent had returned to Southwest, while others had gone to New York.⁹² Tijerina joined Cornelius Owens, Chief Mad Bear, and Clifton Johnson to discuss the future of the PPC.⁹³

On July 2, SCLC called an Emergency Ministers' Conference, which was held at St. Stephen's Baptist Church in Washington. The goal of the conference was to assess where the movement was and where it was headed, defining both its goals and values as they entered a new phase of the campaign. An immediate and long-range goal was to continue to conduct a local movement in Washington with national participation, as well as mobilizing the nation with local movements in cities and towns across the country. The organization planned to continue focusing on the issue of hunger, highlighting the need for surplus foods to be used to end starvation and for a transformation in the way the nation thought about subsidies, which were attributed to energizing the economy, and welfare, which was seen as "public leaches on economy." SCLC planned to popularize statistics that demonstrated how much more past, present and future programs "to kill"

⁹² Report to Attorney General's office, July 10, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

cost—\$108 billion—compared to programs “to heal”—a mere \$19 million. Along with revitalizing the PPC, SCLC had learned from this campaign that they must understand issues functioned at different scales and planned to consider “Personalism—Localism—Nationalism—Internationalism,” and how their ongoing programs, such as Operation Breadbasket, could reach people at each of these levels. SCLC hoped to mobilize the nation through national media outlets, such as radio, television news and programs, the black press and black radio, as well as SCLC’s own press. Having had successful participation from a wide range of celebrities, SCLC also planned to “Use Stars constructively.” To help propel local campaigns, SCLC turned to churches, grassroots civil rights organizations, labor unions, women’s activist groups, peace advocates, and local youth.

The director of Student Activities of the Los Angeles Chapter of SCLC reported at the Ministers Conference on the accomplishments this one local group had experienced when organizing for the PPC. Gregory “Jarbe” Durant reported that the group had “sent 200 tons of food and clothing to Marks” and promised to “continue to send 80,000 pounds of food and clothing every week.” Along with these donations, Durant reported that the group had managed to find employment for 179 poor people and had established Camp Martin Luther King, which was located about thirty miles from Julian, California. The camp enabled 163 impoverished youth to enjoy activities like volleyball, softball, horseback riding, swimming, and hiking between June 22 and July 6. The group also established a permanent organization called Project Uplift that helped foster relationships between “impoverished families and individuals able to help them” with employment,

⁹³ Telegram from Andrew Young, June 28, 1968, SCLC, 49:4.

housing, and friendship. Yet, Durant bemoaned that despite these accomplishments there was “a serious problem” where the organization was “becoming stagnated because of a lack of means for acquiring funds.” The group asked that rather than having to seek money from SCLC’s national office, the local organization wished to become “an autonomous affiliate” so that they could better direct their own programs.⁹⁴

Cornelius Givens, SCLC’s organizer in New York, reported on the independent New York group and activity in the Northeast after the fall of Resurrection City and their efforts to get people to go to Washington to protest and go to jail. But Givens described the resistance he was facing, explaining that people in the Northeast “don’t want to go to jail unless they can see reasons for going.” Givens insisted that the “primary reason why people are not supporting the Poor People’s campaign is that most of the activists in this country come out of the Northeast, be they donors of money, or be it producing bodies,” explaining that people in the Northeast “are not concerned with food stamps. They can’t care a damn less,” and were therefore unwilling to return to Washington to march to the Agriculture building, since that was the most popular site during the Resurrection City phase of the PPC. Givens proposed that if the PPC focused on the Restitution Trust Fund or attacked the Federal Reserve Board, that the people of in the Northeast might be willing to go to jail for these issues.⁹⁵

While the PPC did not expand its goals to address these issues, they kept the Washington protests going, focusing on Congress in general. SCLC ensured that the PPC would be a visible part of the massive July 4th celebration in the nation’s capital. In one

⁹⁴ Gregory “Jarbe” Durant, Director of Student Activities, SCLC Los Angeles Chapter, July 2, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:21.

of the most performative displays of the movement, approximately fifty participants marched to the Capitol flanked by four of the Mule Train's covered wagons. When the group arrived at the Capitol, they sat down and "broke watermelons in the street," presumably to challenge the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky poor person that dominated U.S. popular culture during and after slavery to salve the nation's conscience for its brutal exploitation of labor. The theatrical protest resulted in fifteen arrests and received considerable press.⁹⁶ On July 9, the assault on Congress continued. SCLC hosted a two-day meeting of clergymen representing fifteen states. After Marian Wright briefed the ministers about the conditions of the poor, the clergymen visited with their state's senators and representatives urging them to support the PPC-backed legislation and the recommendations of the Kerner Commission.⁹⁷

CHILDREN OF THE UNIVERSE

Once Abernathy was released on July 12, the protests escalated again. After a small vigil was held at the jail to dramatize Abernathy's release, a series of groups were scheduled to pay visits to their congressmen to lobby for the PPC's goals. These groups were to be a mix of participants from all of the various ethnic and regional groups that had participated in earlier stages of the movement, as well as middle-class citizens who support the campaign. Dick Hathaway of the Friends Committee on National Legislation proposed that a "possible escalation of these lobbying visits could take place if desired by beginning sit-ins in Congressmen's outer offices. These need not be considered civil

⁹⁵ Cornelius Givens Interview.

⁹⁶ Daily Report, July 4, 1968, Attorney General Ramsey Clark Papers, LBJ Library.

⁹⁷ Schedule, Tuesday, July 9, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:34.

disobedience but rather as a polite waiting on Congressmen to take positive action.”⁹⁸

Rather than enacting civil disobedience, SCLC attempted a new strategy, singling out particular groups among the poor whom the nation might be more sympathetic to than the poor in general.

The new effort began on July 12 with the initiation of the Children of the Universe program. This new phase of the PPC mimicked the Committee of 100’s original lobbying caravan through the capital. The Children of the Universe, the “soldiers of the Poor People’s Army” presented their proposals and demands for enhanced opportunities for teenage employment, purposeful education, daycare for the young, and preventive medical care. The PPC’s Information Center released a flyer explaining this program and declared that these children participated as “symbols of humanity before it is warped by want and unfulfilled need . . . They came as proof that the problem is not so complex that it can’t be understood. Even they understand.” The flyer expressed the PPC’s leadership’s hope that “People who have not been sympathetic to the cries and demands of adults may be captured by the demands of the children,” a tactic SCLC had used with success in past campaigns, such as the Birmingham movement. The flyer explained that while the government had dismissed the adults protesting as part of the PPC, “Children cannot be maneuvered and mishandled like adults. There, the government is forced to listen to the demands of children.”⁹⁹ The children signed a pledge that declared:

“I am a child of the universe,
and I pledge my soul to one God.
I’ll give my thoughts to man,

⁹⁸ Abernathy Release Day, Friday, July 12, 1968, KL, SCLC, 179:8.

⁹⁹ Linda Cusumano, SCLC Information Center, Children of the Universe, July 10, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:10.

That one day my children, and
My children's children, will be
The new universe of our great
Society and one day—God will remember!¹⁰⁰

While the Information Center communicated the purpose and goals of the Children of the Universe program to the public, the children made themselves both seen and heard at government agencies, just as their parents had done during the earlier stages of the PPC.

Two boys delivered speeches at HEW detailing what their lives were like and how they proposed the government could help them change their families' situation. One of the boys, named Jimmy, was from Marks, Mississippi, "where there are a lot of kids." Jimmy reported that he had met a lot of other kids in Washington that came from all over the nation and that they had been "getting together now as Children of the Universe and have been asking a lot of questions about how bad things are these days. Jimmy took on a more defiant tone, and insisted:

Now that we're together and thinking about the same things, you know, the things about poverty and hunger and malnutrition that our folk have been talking about; we want to tell folks that its not going to be like that for us. That's right, things will be different, We're going to go to school so that we can learn how to express our ideas so people won't call us stupid and say we deserve to be poor. Some of the things we've learned here have taught us that poor folk ain't the stupid ones, anyway, and besides what could be more stupid than to say somebody deserves to be poor? Well, that's what a lot of people say; but like I said, things are going to be different; we're going to change things.

This Child of the Universe not only had an amazing grasp on the gap between the rhetoric of poverty and the reality of being poor, he spoke to concerns with which only a small group of adults had begun to grapple. Looking towards the future, Jimmy declared with amazing foresight,

¹⁰⁰ Children of the Universe Pledge, KL, SCLC, 177:10.

we have to think about changing things, cause if we don't they're going to get worse. Like the air being polluted; you think we want to breathe that? And the water, too—we like to go swimming, and we're going to go swimming. And do you thin we want to grow up just so we can go to war—we are going to grow up to live, not to kill and die. I've learned here that there are lots of children in this country that can't go to sleep at night because they're afraid rats are going to eat up their feet. Oh, we gonna change things. Yes, sir. Things are going to be different.

Demonstrating his potential as a great orator and possible politician went on to launch a direct attack against Congress. He declared that he and the other children knew that the government had devoted a large sum of money for the War on Poverty and chastised the various government agencies for poor use of the funds:

They gave you folks a lot of money to do things about preventative medicine, education, nutrition, recreation, housing, desegregation, sanitation—you know all those things, you have a lot of offices with those names, so you know them—and, we've been learning you aren't doing much with all that money about changing things so we're gonna go ahead and changes them ourselves. We feel great about tomorrow, that's what we call Soul Power. How do you feel?¹⁰¹

After all of the negative press about the PPC and confrontations between protesters and law enforcement, the Children of the Universe were giving the movement a positive spin.

The other boy, Danny, continued with Jimmy's themes of hope and promise for the future. He began his speech by declaring that the Children of the Universe were “happy kids because we're looking forward to better tomorrows.” Like Jimmy, Danny challenged the culture of poverty's depiction of the poor as trapped in a cycle of hopelessness and despair, demanding that, “We've been told that we won't have a chance in this world—that there is nothing to hope for—that we will grow up with lousy attitudes. But we're not going to have anything to do with that. No sir!” Danny declared

¹⁰¹ Jimmy's Speech, HEW Auditorium, July 12, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:10.

that while his goals might seem like “a fantasy” to some, he had specific plans for how to make their world a better one. He proposed:

First, if the law makes our mothers work, we’re going to have a place to go where we can learn. We call that “Visiting Mothers.” Then we have a place to go when our teeth hurt, or get a bad cut; we call that the “Family Doctor’s Office.” When we have to make improvements on our house, we go to the “Sereno Workshop” and learn how to do it ourselves. Whenever there are any problems with the authorities we go to the “High Life Office” for help and advise. If there is something wrong in our neighborhood the “Searchers” will find it send help. We will have a place that knows all about Congress that will tell us how we can help get bills passed that we think should be passed. We will have a place to go to learn about jobs and how to train for them. We will have a place to go to learn how to teach children who are too young to go to school. We will have our own newspaper, our own speaker’s bureau, our own choir and our own economic boycott and demonstration workshop.

Danny’s city reflected many of the goals of Resurrection City, while his final suggestion mimicked the purpose of the Poor People’s University. Like Jimmy, Danny criticized the government in his speech, insisting that in this ideal place:

We’re going to have “something called the ‘Sensitivity Workshop,’ too—that’s where we will teach folks from your agencies how it is in our neighborhood—and that’s where your people can teach our folks how to teach our own . . . I’m telling you all about this ‘cause we going to set up a community welfare program just like it right here in Washington so you can see how it works. All of these things will be on one block—you’ll give us the money to help out with that—and they will be right there where the folks can go right to them.¹⁰²

These children demonstrated that they were just as articulate and had just as many detailed and creative suggestions for what the PPC should do next as many of the adults.

The following day participants were to meet at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church for a Salute to Abernathy for having gone to jail and fasted to protest children going hungry in a rich nation. That Sunday, the PPC enjoyed a Pray Day and Picnic, at which the

¹⁰² Danny’s Speech, HEW Auditorium, July 12, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:10.

children would ask adults to join the PPC and “help make their dreams come true,” and enjoy a picnic in the park. The events for the children continued into the next week. After participating in small citywide marches on Tuesday, July 16, the children would return to the government agencies on Friday July 19 for responses to their proposals and demands. Although protests would continue in Washington through the end of the month, Abernathy had announced that SCLC could not provide food or housing to people after July 19. While the organization offered participants bus tickets home, it planned to close the PPC’s administrative offices that Friday, although tickets home would be made available until the office closed.¹⁰³

Despite the fact that the PPC’s leadership had closed its headquarters, the next day participants planned to surround local supermarkets as a symbolic protest for Food Day, which was intended to display the ideal of “sharing of those who have with those who have not.” That Sunday, participants enjoyed another Pray Day Picnic, and the following day, July 22, the PPC held a march from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument followed by a rally at the Sylvan Theater, where children delivered speeches and enjoyed entertainment. After the mass rally, buses of child participants were sent to various government agencies. The Baby Red group went to the Capitol, the Baby Blue bus visited the ever-popular Department of Agriculture, the Baby Orange contingent protested at HEW, the Baby Green group went to the Department of Justice, while the Baby Pink kids met with the PPC’s friends at OEO.

¹⁰³ “Abernathy Speaks,” *True Unity News*, July 17, 1968, KL, SCLC, 180:14.

MARCH OF THE HANDICAPPED

While the children were participating in the last major event of the Children of the Universe program, SCLC was leading another protest, a “March of the Handicapped.” A group of disabled poor people traveled from their meeting place at Mt. Carmel Church to the Department of Labor where Abernathy and a committee of disabled representatives met with Secretary of Labor Williard Wirtz to discuss this group’s employment needs. From there, the group traveled to the Department of Agriculture where they met Andrew Young. After the presentation of the group’s demands they followed Hosea Williams and Fonda Ellinger who led a march to the Capitol, where Williams delivered a speech in support of the needs of the disabled poor.¹⁰⁴

WOMEN’S SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE AGAINST RACISM, WAR, AND POVERTY

The PPC rounded out the month of July and its Washington protest efforts as it had begun the Washington stage of the PPC, with a mass women-led march on July 31, sponsored by the Women’s Solidarity Committee Against Racism, War, and Poverty, whose members included, “Mrs. Ralph Abernathy, Mrs. Andrew Young, Mrs. Hosea Williams, Mrs. Dagmar Wilson, Mrs. Vivian Hallinan, and Miss Barbara Deming.” The way in which SCLC’s women’s group chose to identify its members reflected the male dominance within the organization, despite the fact that the women were leading this one-day march. The women organizing the event received support from several women’s activist groups, such as Women’s Strike for Peace, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the New England Committee for Nonviolent Action, and NWRO. The Women’s Solidarity Committee advertised the march as a response to calls from

Coretta Scott King and pacifist, feminist Congresswoman Jeanette Rankin for an end to war and hunger. They envisioned the march as an opportunity for women for peace to form an alliance for women combating poverty, since as their flyer argued, “the continuing war and military economy of America are direct causes of the hunger so many children suffer.” The flyer encouraged women that their “strength as American women is a powerful force in confronting our government on these issues,” and pledged that their actions might result in arrest, but that it was “time for the women of American to call on their own strength, ‘to rise up’ in the cause of justice and brotherhood.”¹⁰⁵ In addition to the mass march on July 31, the Women’s Mobilization Committee promised to announce at this event plans for an economic boycott directed towards women to coincide with SCLC’s nationwide boycott,¹⁰⁶ which was being planned as the next major phase of the PPC.

THE FUTURE OF THE PPC: A NATIONAL BOYCOTT

Along with efforts to keep in contact with local communities and encourage them to continue to enact their own grassroots efforts and mobilize activists to go to Washington, demonstrate, and face arrests, SCLC was also planning or organizing a national boycott campaign. The organization planned to popularize the boycotts by

¹⁰⁴ Planning of the March of the Handicapped, July 7, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:12.

¹⁰⁵ Women’s Solidarity Committee Against Racism, War, and Poverty, “To the Women of America,” KL, SCLC, 180:17. Like the women who participated in the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike and used the men’s slogan “I Am a Man,” these women apparently felt more comfortable using the “brotherhood” than the more appropriate sisterhood. Perhaps this is evidence of how new the concept of feminism was for many women and how they were just forming a language to express their needs. For more on women’s use of the “I Am a Man” slogan see Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

defining major shopping areas as “Unholy Ground.” Participants would be asked to hold coordinated boycotts of national department stores and local malls across the nation, with the hopes of bringing retail sales to a screeching halt until the government did more to aid the poor. SCLC planned to launch the attack in each region, and SCLC staff was sent to the areas where they had worked previously organizing for the PPC. The target cities included all of the major cities along the East Coast—New York, Boston, Washington, Atlantic City, Newark, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia—many cities, small and large, throughout the South where SCLC had strong affiliates—Richmond, Raleigh, Greensboro. Atlanta, Nashville, Memphis, Little Rock, Birmingham, Montgomery, Jackson, Natchez, New Orleans—several cities in Texas—Dallas, Ft. Worth, Houston, and El Paso—a few Southwestern cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Albuquerque—as well all of the major cities throughout the Midwestern—St. Louis, Kansas City, Indianapolis, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Milwaukee.¹⁰⁷

SCLC planned to start off in Chicago boycotting five national companies: Sears, Walgreen’s, Montgomery Wards, Woolworth, and Goldblatt’s. In addition to boycotting these companies, SCLC planned to boycott ten different name brand products nationwide, which included Hunt’s Tomato Catsup, Campbell’s Soup, Quaker Oats, Dixie Crystal Sugar, Continental Baking Co., and SPAM to support the protest efforts of Meat Packers, as well as some fruits and vegetables, such as grapes, to support the United Farm Workers of California (UFWOC) in their ongoing boycott to protest agribusiness’ treatment of migrant farm workers. SCLC tried to promote the concept of shopping

¹⁰⁶ Memo to SCLC Executive Committees from Mary Suzuki and Bertha Kricker, Women’s Mobilization, July 13, 1968, KL, SCLC, 180:17.

centers being “Unholy Ground,” and promoted several slogans to support the boycott, such as “Diet with the poor—don’t buy anything new,” “Redistribute the Pain,” “Surplus vs. Starvation,” and an anti-war slogan, “Napalm vs. Nutrition: Defense Contracts, War Budgets vs. HEW.” The goals were the same as the PPC; SCLC had simply shifted its focus from Congress to the consumer, hoping that as “citizen consumers” people could force Congress by way of big business to launch a legitimate war on poverty. SCLC had gained endorsements for the boycott from several labor groups—the UAW, the Packinghouse union, and the Teamsters—as well as civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP and National Urban League, along with a host of other groups, such as NWRO, the YMCA and YWCA, the black press, major peace groups, other poor ethnic groups, local churches and community organizations, national women’s organizations, and the Suburban Human Relations Council.¹⁰⁸

While SCLC was busy planning the national boycott, mobilizing local communities to continue and expand their efforts in support of the PPC, and conducting protests in Washington, individuals working independently or in conjunction with SCLC were making plans of their own. Mike Halberstam, one of the doctors who worked at the Medical Tent in Resurrection City wrote to Andrew Young on July 2, encouraging SCLC to keep the PPC visible in the nation’s capital. Halberstam insisted that the PPC must reach out to the American people rather than trying to force Congress to act, explaining that congressmen would only respond if their constituents complained about poverty. Halberstam encouraged PPC leaders to take control of their image, since the press had

¹⁰⁷ Economic Boycott Target Cities, July 1, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:6.

¹⁰⁸ Program for National Mobilization, July 6, 1968. KL, SCLC, 179:12.

done nothing but malign it, and do their own “explaining and lobbying.” He proposed the following:

Set up a small, permanent Poverty City in Washington. Invite the public in . . . Let them walk through an average apartment in public housing, unairconditioned in 95-degree heat. Let them think about how one studies or reads or rests in what we provide for our urban poor. Show them through a sharecropper’s shanty, a Navajo Hogan. Let them smell poverty, let them talk to the poor. Let the poor explain to them that the black faces different problems than the poor immigrant from Norway or Poland that the tourist will cite as having worked his own way up. Have an auditorium where movies can be shown, where the tourists can ask a panel of the poor (and those sympathetic to the necessity for ending poverty now) questions about what needs to be done and how to do it.

Halberstam argued that rather than being “on exhibit,” as they had been in Resurrection City, that the poor would serve as “dignified, articulate guides telling people about their lives.” He insisted that the location of this project should be in Washington because the nation’s capital had millions of tourists visit the sites each year from all over the nation, whether as individuals, with family, or on school trips. This permanent display of poverty would, according to Halberstam, reach the people the PPC needed to direct its attention to—American citizens who lived above the poverty level.¹⁰⁹

THE POOR PEOPLE’S EMBASSY

Halberstam was not alone in his calls for a permanent institute representing the poor in Washington. Young had written to Richard Hauser, Director of the Center for Group Studies in London the day before regarding his proposal for a Poor People’s Embassy. Young requested Hauser’s presence so that the program, which included training, research, and liaisons for the poor both in Washington and across the nation,

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Michael J. Halberstam, M.D. to Rev. Andrew Young, July 2, 1968, KL, SCLC, 49:4.

could proceed forward, offering to pay Hauser's expenses to travel to Washington for a meeting on July 5. On July 13-14, approximately fifty people involved with the PPC met at the Airlie House in Warrenton, Virginia to prepare a proposal for a permanent Poor People's Embassy in Washington. A Planning Committee was organized to write a formal proposal for the Embassy that covered the type and location for the physical structure that would house the Embassy, the projected internal and external programs, the proposed structure and staffing, and responses of the poor to the recommendations for these three areas.

The purpose of the Embassy was to provide services that the poor were not receiving from government agencies. Unlike most of these agencies, the Embassy would not allow for the "traditional 'we teach-the poor learn' situations." The proposal explained that, "In order to avoid a self-perpetuating bureaucracy, the Embassy will not initiate programs on its own. It will only engage in projects and actions that it is asked to perform by members of its constituency." The proposal recommended that a Policy Committee elected by a Board of Directors composed of leaders of "organized constituencies of poor people" would make all decisions related to the Embassy. In addition to these two bodies, the Advisory Council, which was composed of organizations and individuals with knowledge about education, civil rights, funding, and legal affairs, would serve both the Board of Directors and the Policy Committee. The proposal insisted that a staff outreach program would supply the Embassy's staff with data, "the ideas of the poor," to ensure that what emerges from the Embassy is "an understanding of poverty based upon the perspective of the poor, a task absolutely necessary for the proper functioning of a Poor People's Embassy."

The Embassy organizers went to great lengths to ensure that poor people would be directing the programs that the planners proposed, outlining both internal and external programs to help the nation's poor both in Washington and across the nation. Some of the internal programs proposed included Program Planning, which would "develop practical problem solving techniques" by uniting the poor with others who had specialized technical skills in the problem area. The Embassy would also include a Leadership Training component that would consist of "a wide range of workshops activities relevant to leadership development." Another component would be the Cross-Cultural Experience, a program that would "provide cultural interaction" and "promote understanding and develop cooperation among poverty minority groups." The Embassy would also include a Special Assistance program that would use academic and community-trained specialists to help solve poverty problems relating to the media and communications, government programs, cooperatives, legal aid, and other areas in which experts might be of assistance to the poor. The Embassy would serve as an Information Clearing House by providing publications, research findings, and evaluations of government programs, as well as a Social Education program that would educate the non-poor "who hold narrow social attitudes and detrimental stereotypes of the poor." The external programs were to be run by Field Staff who would attempt to develop local leadership and encourage grassroots community organization, provide "a continuous flow of relevant information back to the Embassy," provide contacts for the poor, conduct workshops related to both local and national issues, and coordinate programs and direct action "on a national scale."¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Proposal for a Poor People's Embassy, KL, ~~50~~LC, 179:21.

Once again, the PPC made plans to simultaneously conduct local and national campaigns and attempted to put poor people at the vanguard of the movement's leadership. The Embassy's proposed budget for just the first five months of its existence was \$154, 250.¹¹¹ With SCLC left broke after coping with the expenses of Resurrection City and paying to get participants back home, the organization had little hope of pulling off the grand scheme of the Poor People's Embassy, and there is no evidence to suggest that the Embassy ever got off the ground, but many PPC leaders saw great hope in the Embassy. When interviewed on July 9, SCLC staff member Ernest Austin expressed his concern over the potential success of the boycott, insisting, "I'm not sure that we can bring off the national boycott the way we have it structured now," but was encouraged by the proposal for the Embassy, declaring that, "if the embassy proves functional, then it would be a definite gain to prove information center, research center, lobbying center, demonstration center, and things of this nature," but questioned "whether it will get bogged down in the same thing that the campaign got bogged down in is another question." Austin proposed that along with ensuring the future of the Embassy, SCLC needed to mobilize the people, particularly those "who think that the campaign had folded its tents and silently stolen away." Austin insisted:

I mean to get them back with a militant message that we're still here and we're still in business and the boycott is the next thing. We've got to get back in contact with the student groups. We have to rearrange our liaison with the peace groups. Not in terms of Resurrection City, but in terms of the fact that while you have a hungry world, you're not going to have a peaceful world. And if you want to have peace, then hunger, it's going to be tied in with that and you can tie it into boycott position.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Proposal for a Poor People's Embassy, KL, SCLC, 179:21.

¹¹² Ernest Austin Interview, July 9, 1968.

The Embassy would serve as a national coordinating center for whatever national campaigns SCLC planned to enact, but its future was uncertain at this stage.

TAKING POLITICAL ACTION

Along with plans for the national boycott and the Poor People's Embassy, SCLC planned to initiate a Political Action campaign to coincide with the presidential campaigns and national party conventions. On July 21, Hosea Williams proposed a plan of action, calling for research on black candidates for any political office, a register of all offices blacks currently held at the local, district, state, and national levels, as well as statistics on the total potential registration of voters, as well as the figures for whites compared to that of blacks. The goal of the research was for SCLC to be able to make an informed decision on which candidates to publicly support.

Williams proposed that three committees' be established, one to interview and screen potential candidates based on questions from local communities, a political guidance committee to advise on which candidates to support, and a patronage committee to organize, mobilize, and implement an "effective 'Get-Out-The-Vote'" campaign. Another recommendation was the creation of a "Poor People's Political Party" that would involve the poor in the political process and reflect their needs in the national agenda. Plans were also made to involve the youth in the political process by organizing Poor People's Statewide Conventions at which the various youth groups could meet and discuss their goals for the future. The Convention would include youth of all ages, such as the Children of the Universe (ages 6-13), the Black Diplomats of the Future (ages 14-

18), and Abernathy's Berets (ages 18-25),¹¹³ an obvious reference to the militant Brown Berets, groups of young, radical Chicanos who emulated the style and rhetoric of the Panthers.

REFLECTING ON THE PPC

After the fall of Resurrection City, the media depictions of the PPC became a bit more balanced, but most continued to focus on the PPC's failures, while critiques from the government persisted. Headlines like "A Crusade Collapses" and "End of the Dream" still dominated the press.¹¹⁴ In mid-August, Senator Robert C. Byrd was quoted in the *U.S. News & World Report* as having estimated that the PPC cost the U.S. government and the District of Columbia a total of 1.7 million dollars. Byrd insisted that the District spent \$805,682 just to police Resurrection City and handle the arrests of PPC participants. The government billed the financially struggling SCLC with \$71,795 of the total sum to cover the cost of tearing down the shantytown and threatened to sue the organization if they failed to pay the bill quickly.¹¹⁵ While the image of an interracial coalition dressed in their Sunday best, singing "We Shall Overcome" and hearing speeches like "I Have a Dream" is celebrated and memorialized on a yearly basis, the Poor People's Campaign remains absent from our popular memory because the thought of poor people, primarily people of color, occupying the National Mall, perhaps the most celebrated space in the United States, was more than the media, the American public, and

¹¹³ Hosea Williams, Political Action, July 21, 1968, KL, SCLC, 177:6.

¹¹⁴ Monroe W. Karmin, "A Crusade Collapses," *U.S. News & World Report*, July 8, 1968, 87-88; "End of the Dream," *Newsweek*, July 9, 1968, 19.

¹¹⁵ "'Poor March'—What It Cost," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 19, 1968.

government could handle. The government chose to seek retribution for the invasion of poor people by making SCLC cover the cost of the city's destruction.

The press and Congress were not the only ones to question the logic of the PPC and what it cost. A PPC organizer and SCLC staff member, Tom Kahn, had his assessment of the PPC, "Why the Poor People's Campaign Failed," published in *Commentary* in September of 1968. Acknowledging that the PPC was "a project which has been attacked more widely, and with more contempt, than any 'radical' action in years," Kahn questioned, as others had before and during the campaign, whether the tactic of displaying poverty would work. He challenged activists to consider the lessons learned from Resurrection City:

Now it seems appropriate to question the notion, implicit in so much meliorist thinking, that the recognition of a problem is its solution. The affluent majority, once shown the face of poverty, can react in alternative ways . . . while one approach to the problem is to work for guaranteed jobs and income, another is to conclude from recent events that the poor are their own worst enemy, and that they must be repressed into respect for the law and order as a precondition for receiving any advances that the future might hold. There is, in short nothing in the faces of the poor themselves that will necessarily inspire the sympathy or supportive political action of the majority; poverty can just as easily inspire fear and revulsion.

Kahn acknowledged that others had argued that the PPC succeeded because it forced white America to see the grim reality of poverty and the effects of racism, serving as a challenge to "an idealized image of cheerful black-and-white togetherness." Kahn's most salient point was his challenge to radical intellectuals who he argued were romanticizing "the lumpenproletariat" by applying to it "the sentimental image of the proletariat that was fashionable in this country in the 1930's." Instead, Kahn questions whether "classes are progressive—or reactionary—in and of themselves, but only in relation to their social

roles.” While Kahn’s insight is significant, it is one that the leaders of the PPC and its visionary held from the beginning. Those who participated in the movement—SCLC’s leaders, activists, and the poor people who joined the campaign—present a much more balanced assessment of the PPC compared to those of journalists and scholars.

Michael Harrington, the journalist/activist who first “discovered” the poverty of the “other” America in the early 1960s, praised the PPC for exposing the hunger that existed throughout the nation and the government and agribusiness’ complicity. While criticizing the PPC’s leadership’s for failing to produce specific, achievable goals, Harrington insisted that the root problem was that “America knows how to abolish poverty but doesn’t want to do it.”¹¹⁶

Andrew Young, one of the most reflective of SCLC’s leaders recounts that he felt “at the time” that “it was something to be endured,” but as years passed he came to appreciate the PPC:

Looking back, I can see that it marked the emergence of a broad-based progressive coalition: poor people who were black, white, brown, and red; religious leaders; union leaders; peace activists. Jobs, peace, and freedom would be linked, sustained through a loose shifting, but persistent coalition of organizations. Among the people gathered were some who would go on to head organizations and become members of Congress and elected officials from small Southern communities.¹¹⁷

In retrospect, Young recognized that the PPC marked the beginning of a new phase in the struggle for equality—one in which identity, history, and cultural pride would play an increasingly significant in the goals of social movements, while forming coalitions with other groups struggling for economic rights would become a necessity.

¹¹⁶ Michael Harrington, “The Will to Abolish Poverty,” *Saturday Review*, July 27, 1968, 10-14.

¹¹⁷ Young, 488.

Charles Cheng, an Asian American activist and organizer of the Poor People's University concurred with Young. He insisted that the PPC was significant for "the very fact that for the first time there was an interracial protest, a marked demonstration against a capitalistic racist form of government" but expressed his concern over the future effect of the campaign, explaining, "I'm afraid that some of us have neglected to build from that because many thought it was not just a radical enough kind of program." Despite Cheng's concern over whether the PPC would serve as an effective model, he argued that "understanding the masses of color that were involved I think it was a real threat to, for want of a better term, to those who control our destiny at this time . . . If you carefully read the Poor People's Campaign you'll see that that's where a lot of this began." Cheng recognized just how radical the PPC actually was and suggested that "some day somebody will see as much" in this multiracial anti-poverty movement as many "saw in many of Malcolm's contributions."¹¹⁸

Jesse Jackson reported on the successes of the movement in "Resurrection City: The Dream . . . The Accomplishments," echoing some of Cheng's and Young's insights. Jackson placed blame for the PPC's bad reputation on the press, arguing:

Thus the general level of the nation's insensitivity and unawareness was in part attributable to a press that deals often in sensationalism, personalities and in protecting big business . . . Thus a nation largely uninformed was challenge to judge the personal behavior of poor people rather than the collective behavior of the Congress. Given the press preferences for problems of process rather than the purpose of the Poor People's Campaign, the adversaries of the poor exploded those problems out of proportion in order to avoid the issues of inequality in our economic structure. From mud to personality differences in Resurrection City

¹¹⁸ Charles Cheng Interview.

occupied their time rather than the cries for food, jobs, and opportunity that brought Resurrection City into being.¹¹⁹

Jackson emphasized the amazing accomplishment the movement had made simply in uniting the nation's diverse poor and recognized that one of the greatest strides the PPC had made was in demonstrating to poor whites the ways in which they had gained the wages of whiteness—the power to dominate people of color and the privilege of whiteness in a racist society—but had lost economic security in the process. Jackson insisted that living in Resurrection City produced these insights:

It was in our wallowing together in the mud of Resurrection City that we were allowed to hear, to feel and to see each other for the first time in our American experience. This vast task of acculturation of pulling the poor together was a way of amassing economic, political, and labor power, was the great vision of Dr. King.¹²⁰

Along with creating a coalition that produced self-reflection in the poor people and challenged their own inherent biases, Jackson recognized the effect the PPC had on the country as a whole.

He insisted that the PPC had served as a direct challenge to the myth the culture of poverty theory perpetuated. Jackson declared that the poor people's protests had “broken the myth that the poor are poor because of laziness and indifference. The fact is the poor work the hardest, the longest and perform the nastiest chores, but the rich have the resources for image-making to determine how people view one another's plight.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Jackson, “Resurrection City: The Dream . . . The Accomplishments,” *Ebony* (October, 1968): 65-69, 74.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Jackson's assessment of the PPC was dramatically different from most because his criteria for a successful social movement were not based on achieving a set of specific legislative gains. He defined the PPC as a substantial victory:

We gained victory in the few concrete programs that passed through Congress such as the \$100,000,000-a-year food program. But more importantly, our victory was bigger. Victory is revealing the state of hunger in America. Victory is exposing the scandalous agricultural subsidies to the rich. Victory is the evolution of human sensitivity and consciousness to our brothers' predicament. Victory is the renewed determination of the civil rights movement after the assassination of Dr King for though the dreamer is dead, the dream lives on. Victory is the poor of all races coming together. Victory is to be ignored by the political power of the White House but to have the capacity to respond with the soul power of the black house. Victory is the new relationships created and the lessons learned.¹²²

While Jackson's evaluation of the PPC differed from most of his contemporaries and from most historians' analyses, he optimistically prophesized that "History is on our side . . . Resurrection City cannot be seen as a mudhole in Washington, but it is rather an idea unleashed in history."¹²³

CONCLUSION

King's original goal for the PPC was to challenge the nation to eradicate poverty on moral grounds based on the argument that poor people deserved as basic rights to have shelter, food, and clothing. King and many of his followers were at their root Christian socialists who believed that in a Judeo-Christian society the people in the form of a representative government should provide basic needs for its people as a basic right of citizenship. This chapter has argued that fear and revulsion dominated the reactions from the government and the media, the latter of which ensured that the majority of the

¹²² Jackson, "Resurrection City," 74.

American public would perceive the PPC similarly. The movement fell victim to the pervasive ideology of the culture of poverty. The media's negative portrayal of the movement not only ensured that the popular view of the PPC was that of a failed campaign, the overwhelming focus on the negative aspects of the campaign has contributed to scholars' dismissive characterization of the movement as a failure. If one considers only the press coverage and the government's surveillance of the movement, it appears as a very bleak and unsuccessful campaign. But if we dig a bit deeper and consider all of the perspectives of the PPC—those buried in archives, in oral histories, and in the memories of the participants—we see a much more complex view of this maligned movement.

¹²³ Jackson, "Resurrection City," 74.

CONCLUSION

The Legacy of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign

“One day, we will have to stand before the God of history and we will talk in terms of things we've done. It seems as if I can hear the God of history saying, "That was not enough. For I was hungry, and you fed me not.”¹
—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The media and historians have either neglected or maligned the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. Yet, from the beginning, Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted that if this campaign proved unsuccessful it would be because the U.S. government and the American people failed to act, not because SCLC and the nation's poor had failed in their mission. Yet, the presumed failure of the PPC remains in question because this multi-racial anti-poverty movement had both immediate and lasting consequences. The movement graphically exposed poverty to the nation and forced affluent Americans to confront the unequal distribution of wealth in the richest and most dominant capitalist nation in the world. This study of the PPC challenges histories of the civil rights movement that depict the movement and Dr. King as one in the same, in part, because King was assassinated before the PPC's Washington stage began. Both SCLC staff members and the poor people who participated in the campaign continuously questioned how it might have been different if King had survived to see its fruition, but the PPC took place despite the absence of its visionary.

The PPC was a unique movement both in terms of its use of space—building a temporary shantytown on the National Mall—and in terms of place, in that it functioned

simultaneously at the national, regional, and local scales. The PPC demonstrated the regional diversity of poverty, as well as national trends that affected all of the poor, while it mobilized local grassroots movements that existed throughout the movement's life. The physical space of Resurrection City and the PPC's daily protests challenged stereotypes of the poor that characterized them as a despondent, lazy, "Other" trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty due to their inability to change their behavior and embrace white, middle-class values.

The multiracial coalition the PPC produced, while tenuous at times, revealed that people of color, particularly women and children, made up a disproportionate percentage of the poor, due to the economic exploitation that results from racism and sexism. While the press reported on all of the minor squabbles between the various ethno-racial groups involved in the PPC, the participants remained a united front. The coalition supported not only the broader goals of a guaranteed job or income, but also the specific demands that were rooted in each group's unique history of oppression. The PPC also gave these groups an opportunity to share their rich cultural traditions with each other and with the rest of the nation.

The protests empowered the participants, both by helping them learn how to navigate Washington's bureaucracy and by giving them the ability to confront elected officials who perpetuated their oppression and their poverty. Whether or not the government responded to the specific demands the PPC presented seemed secondary to both participants and leaders, alike. What was important was to expose the issue, to

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in James A. DeVinney and Madison Davis Lacey, Jr., "The Promised Land, 1967-1968," *Eyes on the Prize II*, Episode 4 (Boston: Blackside Productions,

participate in challenging the system, and to gain the satisfaction of having fought back. Participants also enjoyed being away from home in a new and exciting place where they received three square meals a day, social services, and a sense of community, all of which many poor people lacked.

“Civil Rights’ ‘Unfinished Business’” has also demonstrated the importance of space and place for social movements. The methods cultural geographers employ can help us to understand how space, place, and mobility function as important social constructions that affect individuals and groups’ experiences in profound ways and that shape people’s identities. Local people from all over the nation drove the PPC and challenged the government to ensure their basic needs, as they claimed what many considered sacred space to display their poverty. While the national dramatization of poverty was significant, the PPC’s local organizing efforts and the caravans to the capital were equally as important. The PPC’s local movements and the caravans’ performance of poverty transformed the communities they entered. In the introduction to *Groundwork*, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard suggest that, “the local is where the national and international are located—that national events and policy outcomes are driven by local movements and grassroots people.”² The PPC put Marks, Mississippi on the map. The national media’s spotlight on this small Delta town’s poverty resulted from the combination of SCLC’s organizing efforts and the will of the local people to join forces and oppose the town’s power structure. The caravans connected activists from different regions and diverse political perspectives and helped forge national movements that still

1990).

exist today. The goal now is to connect the local, the regional, the national, and when possible, the transnational to understand how activism at each of these scales affects the others.

In March of 2006 at a conference organized by revisionist civil rights scholar Emilye Crosby, “Local Studies, a National Movement: Toward a Historiography of the Black Freedom Movement,” teachers and students of the civil rights movement gathered to hear John Dittmer, Charles Payne, several *Groundwork* contributors, and some up-and-coming scholars discuss the future of civil rights historiography. In his keynote address, “Why Study the Movement?” Payne called on scholars to consider why certain families in the Delta and in other locales stood up and fought while others stood by. He challenged the audience to connect the past with the present and to refocus our attention on the idea of human growth, demonstrating how people and places have grown and changed by focusing on the *process* of organizing rather than evaluating the product of a movement. These have been the goals driving this analysis of the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign.

Rather than mimicking previous studies of the PPC, which have each offered a different reason for why the movement failed, “Civil Rights’ ‘Unfinished Business,’” has sought to explore what the PPC meant for the participants, leaders, volunteers, and spectators who took part in this radical social experiment. Newbern Rooks reflects back on the PPC, thinking about his joy in building his own tent and helping others build theirs. For Augusta Denson, the campaign led to a new home, better welfare services,

² Theoharis and Woodard, *Groundwork*, 7. 533

and a sense of pride and strength from joining forces with people of other races to transform their lives and the lives of others. Bertha Burres Johnson not only got a job as a result of her participation in the PPC, she also became a community worker who educated poor people throughout the Delta about the available social services and how to access them. Booker Wright, Jr. marveled both at the sites in Washington, but more importantly, at the amazing generosity he and others experienced during their stay from D.C. residents.

All of the participants I encountered explained that they benefited from the PPC simply by enjoying a free trip to Washington, D.C. and the excitement of caravanning across country and touring the nation's capital, especially since most of these people had never been out of their home states. But the journey was much more than a vacation. The PPC provided participants with the opportunity to unite with people who shared both their dreams and frustrations, to learn about people from different places and cultural backgrounds, and most importantly to form a united front to expose and combat poverty.

The participants were not the only ones to appreciate their involvement in the PPC. Jesse Jackson took center stage as the most charismatic of the leaders vying for dominance within the upper echelons of SCLC's leadership structure. In King's absence, Jackson was thrust into the media's spotlight, where he has remained until this day as arguably the most prominent and visible black leader since King's death. After the PPC's Washington phase ended, Jackson returned to Chicago, where he proceeded on with his Operation Breadbasket, which encouraged private industries to end employment discrimination and sought contracts for black businesses with the threat of economic

boycott and held a number of events in 1969 promoted as part of the ongoing Poor People's Campaign.³ He worked with SCLC until 1971 but was unhappy with Abernathy's leadership and decided to form his own organization, PUSH, People United to Save Humanity. Building on the PPC's goals, Jackson hoped PUSH would replicate the PPC's multiracial coalition to mobilize the economic and political power of poor people. However, charges of financial irregularities forced Jackson to depart from both Operation Breadbasket and PUSH, at which point he moved into politics. The PPC first placed the young preacher in the spotlight, and by the mid 1980s, he had conducted two promising presidential campaigns, winning 3,250,000 votes in 1984 and over seven million votes and nine state primaries in 1988. Jackson has remained at the forefront of every major, or minor, controversy involving African Americans as a public advocate for all poor people.

Jackson dominated the headlines with his charisma and colorful rhetoric, but the press tended to seek out the other predominant leader within SCLC, Andrew Young, for the logistics and details concerning the PPC and SCLC's other actions. Young's eloquence and insightfulness made him well suited for his future endeavors as U.S. Representative for the state of Georgia, a position he held from 1973 to 1977, the first African American ambassador to the United Nations, under Jimmy Carter, and the mayor of the city of Atlanta throughout much of the 1980s. Young's roles within the PPC were many, and juggling the logistics of running a temporary city of the poor while conducting daily direct action protests surely prepared him for his future role as a politician.

³ See Walter Fauntroy Papers, George Washington University.

While Jackson and Young moved into electoral politics, other PPC leaders remained focused on grassroots activism or worked to institutionalize anti-poverty and civil rights campaigns. Ralph Abernathy led SCLC in a coalition in support of the striking Local 1199 Charleston hospital workers. Walter Fauntroy, one of the PPC's key Washington leaders, went on to serve in the Senate as the District of Columbia's nonvoting representative, where he advocated for the rights of the District's black residents and all of the nation's poor. Marian Wright Eldeman, the chief architect of the PPC's legislative demands and a constant advocate for the poor founded the Children's Defense Fund in 1973 as a private, non-profit organization that advocates for children, but particularly poor and disabled children. While Marian Wright Eldeman attempted to provide an institutional base for advocates for the poor, Bayard Rustin and Coretta Scott King worked to institutionalize King's legacy and philosophy of non-violence through their efforts, which began shortly after his death and in the wake of the PPC, to establish the King Center for Non-Violence and the King Library and Archives in Atlanta.

While the PPC had a substantial effect on SCLC's leaders and many individual participants, the national, multiracial movement also played a significant role in furthering the development of the burgeoning American Indian and Chicano movements. The national exposure the PPC provided enabled both of these neglected groups, largely located in the Southwest, which the Northeastern-based national media typically ignored. The movement brought together key leaders from both of these groups that were scattered across the Southwest and the rest of the nation, allowing them to forge lasting connections and expand their communication networks, adding to the potential for more

visible, national campaigns. While the PPC demonstrated to each of the groups involved that they faced shared problems of racial discrimination and economic exploitation, the struggles for leadership, resources, and attention might have convinced many that they needed to unite and strengthen the bonds with those who shared a common history, language, and culture first before forming coalitions with others.

Building on both the PPC's emphasis on representation and the still growing black power movement's model of self-determination and cultural pride, American Indians, Chicanos, and Asian Americans would forge vibrant, radical movements that called for better representation in higher education in order to foster greater respect for and appreciation of their cultures, and a more accurate narrative of U.S. history that would include each of these groups experiences of exploitation and discrimination, as well as their resistance to this oppression and their contributions to American culture and society. While some white scholars have bemoaned the onslaught of the "identity movements" of the 1970s and 1980s and the move away from class-based protest, these movements were never divorced from economic concerns. Rather than abandoning a class analysis, the activists who led these movements broadened their analysis of society and recognized the interconnectedness of class and race and how both economic exploitation and racial oppression have gone hand in hand throughout the nation's history. Activists and students recognized that not having teachers who looked like them, not having textbooks that included their people's contributions to society, and not having the history of their people told accurately or told at all were all effects of both racial and economic oppression. Poor people lack power, and those with power are the ones who

tell history, so these “identity movements” were not just about cultural representations so much as attempts to recover the path and pave a better future.

Dennis Banks, co-founder of the American Indian Movement (AIM), expresses the direct connection he and Clyde Bellecourt made between poverty and racism when they decided to form the organization just days after the fall of Resurrection City. Banks recounts,

“When AIM was founded on July 28, 1968, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the living conditions we found ourselves in were deplorable. It wasn’t that we didn’t know there was racism in the cities. It was how racism forced us into squalid slum tenement buildings, closed doors to job opportunities, and fostered racist laws, jails, courts, and prisons. Beginning with our founding meeting, we immediately set out to bring about change in those institutions of public concern: housing, education, employment, welfare, and the courts.”⁴

AIM forced the public to recognize that the myth of the vanishing Indian was just that—a myth. Rather than vanishing, American Indians were simply unseen, either trapped on isolated, impoverished reservations or in deteriorating urban slums. The PPC helped make this group and their poverty visible, and many young Indians embraced the idea of using dramatic protests to gain exposure.

On November 20, 1969, during the early morning hours, the “Indians of All Tribes,” a coalition of young, urban, American Indian college students set off from the Sausalito docks headed for Alcatraz Island, where, five years earlier, five Bay Area Sioux read a declaration of the American Indian Council that reclaimed the island from the U.S.

⁴ Dennis Banks, Excerpt from Foreword to *Native America: Portrait of the Peoples*, ed. Duane Champagne (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1994), reprinted in *Red Power: The American Indians’*

government. While the original group signed a statement that laid a formal claim to the island that would be filed with the Bureau of Land Claims in Sacramento, five years later the nature of protests had transformed, and with a larger and more radical group, the second occupation of Alcatraz would be the one remembered as a major landmark of the burgeoning American Indian Movement. Several of the almost ninety-strong coalition, were young faculty members in the growing number of ethnic studies departments in universities across Northern California, and in other progressive pockets throughout the nation. Just as Resurrection City had been used as a way to dramatize poverty and gain the media, the government, and the public's attention, the seizure of Alcatraz represented a way to dramatize the goals of these young American Indian academics to preserve their culture and history and to share their story with the rest of the nation. American Indian activists kept this protest tradition alive through a number of significant actions during the early 1970s, with their seizure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters in Washington, D.C., in 1972 and the 1973 standoff at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.⁵

The PPC also gave the many different factions of the Chicano Movement an opportunity to unite as one group in a national campaign. In the months after the PPC, young Chicanos created a number of different activist organizations and the formed alliances with other radical groups that included more institutional groups, like the San

Fight for Freedom, ed. Alvin M. Josephy Jr., Joane Nagel, and Troy Johnson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, 2nd edition), 60.

⁵ See Troy R. Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination and The Rise of Indian Activism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Paul Chatt

Antonio-based Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), which was modeled after the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, as well as more militant groups, such as the Brown Berets. The Berets modeled themselves after the Black Panther Party, both in style and in tactics, donning black leather and berets and establishing survival programs to house, clothe, and feed their communities' poor and defend them from abuse at the hands of the police. That same year the formation of another Chicano organization signaled a challenge to Chicano leaders in the PPC who called on the Labor Department and the State Department to curb the violations of undocumented migrant workers. Soledad Alatorre and Bert Corona created the Center for Autonomous Action (CASA), which promoted the slogan "sin fronteras—without borders" and sought to organize both legal and undocumented workers.

While Chicano activists established new social movement organizations, Chicano students forged coalitions with African American and Asian American students on campuses across the West Coast, particularly in the Bay Area. In early 1969, students at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley held strikes that resulted in multiple physical confrontations between student activists and police, but the students prevailed and established some of the first Ethnic Studies departments in the United States. These events culminated in some of the first nationwide Chicano movement events, such as the initial Crusade for Justice-sponsored National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, which took place March 27-31 1969 in Denver; the Chicano Coordinating Council of Higher Education's three day conference at Santa Barbara, which resulted in the

formation of a coalition organization, El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA); and the first Chicano Liberation Day, which was held on September 16, 1969. The concept of La Raza Unida quickly spread across the Southwest, and by 1972, the various regional groups converged for their first National Convention.⁶ While the PPC was not solely responsible for the development of these movements, the unification that took place among the various ethno-racial groups while participating in this national campaign increased the communication networks among various local movements.

The PPC demonstrated the ability of a large social movement organization like SCLC to mobilize resources and people for a sustained national campaign, a task which grassroots local movements alone would find difficult to accomplish. While the PPC was able to unite a multiracial coalition around the issue of poverty in 1968, social movements during the late 1960s started to expand into new and more diffuse issues. Social movement scholars Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani suggest that “new social movements” are interested in “decentralized and participatory organizational structures; defense of interpersonal solidarity against the great bureaucracies; and the reclamation of autonomous spaces, rather than material advantages.”⁷ While the PPC was obviously concerned with “material advantages,” the movement was also concerned

⁶ See George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun: Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996) and *Black, Brown, Yellow, & Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006);

⁷ Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, ed., *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999, 2006), 9.

with achieving the goals associated with the “new social movements.”⁸ Della Porta and Diani argue that the chief reason for the rise of these new social movements has been the “transformation of the economic sphere—in particular, the move to a more or less advanced service and administrative sector and the decentralization of industrial production,” which they suggest has “undermined not only the numerical consistency of the working class but also the living and working conditions that facilitated class action.” These impediments to unified class action have been further complicated by “the capacity of the state to create and reproduce social groups through public intervention has led to an increasing number of demands which are fragmented and increasingly difficult to mediate.”⁹ During the 1990s, as working-class and poor people struggled to make a living, activists struggled to remain focused on the structural roots of poverty and racism, and instead, turned almost exclusively to the effects of these structural problems in terms of issues of representation in the media and the perpetuation of stereotypes. While multiracial class-based movements have faced these challenges, more recently, increasing poverty and the destruction of the welfare state has led to a rebirth of materialist-based movements and working class and poor identities. Perhaps the most visible movement to embrace a working class identity and openly discuss poverty and its related issues was the hip hop culture of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s.

During the late 1990s, the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign experienced a brief

⁸ Della Porta and Diani explain that new social movement theorists have been critiqued for identifying trends as new that had appeared in the past and for failing to clearly articulate how structural transformations resulted in collective action. See Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements*, 10-11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

revival on its thirtieth anniversary. The recovery of the PPC was part of a wider response from local people, as well as from revisionist civil rights historians, such as Charles Payne and John Dittmer, who began to push scholars to consider the local, grassroots movements that challenge many of the myths about the civil rights movement.¹⁰ The same year that these two scholars released their influential, revisionist works, photographer Roland Freeman and Marks native and civil rights scholar Lawrence Lackey both responded to this call by presenting the narrative of the Mule Train and Marks, Mississippi's role in the PPC. Both presented the story of this dismissed movement to the public in much more positive terms than those of the civil rights era.¹¹ That same year, the Mississippi State Legislature joined in the celebration of the PPC by passing House Concurrent Resolution 162 honoring the Mule Train and the activism of Delta residents.¹²

Along with these memorials, several activist organizations used the anniversary as an opportunity to demonstrate that poverty persists in this rich nation. In Pittsburgh, a coalition that included the Pittsburgh NAACP, the National Council for Urban Peace and Justice, the Thomas Merton Center, and Councilman Sala Udin formed a Pittsburgh Poor

¹⁰ See John Dittmer, *Local People*; and Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

¹¹ See Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* and Lawrence Lackey, *Marvin, Marks, and the Mule Train*, and Peter Ling, "Martin Luther King's Half-Forgotten Dream," *History Today*, Vol. 48, Issue 4, (April 1998): 17-23.

¹² MISSISSIPPI LEGISLATURE, 1998 Regular Session, To: Rules; By: Representatives Henderson (9th), Clarke, Evans, Bailey, Blackmon, Bozeman, Broomfield, Clark, Coleman (29th), Coleman (65th), Dickson, Ellis, Flags, Fredericks, Gibbs, Green (96th), Green (72nd), Henderson (26th), Huddleston, Middleton, Morris, Myers, Perkins, Robinson (63rd), Scott (80th), Smith (27th), Straughter, Thomas, Thornton, Walker, Wallace, Watson, West, Young; House Concurrent Resolution 162: A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION HONORING AND RECOGNIZING THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1968 MULE TRAIN SEGMENT OF

People's Campaign to focus attention on and challenge America's worsening racial violence and the continuing economic, housing and health care gaps between wealthy and low-income communities in that city.¹³

But the most prominent organization involved in reviving the mission of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign has been the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC). The PPEHRC was established in 1998 when the Kensington Welfare Rights Union brought together more than fifty organizations from around the country to conduct the first New Freedom Bus Tour: Freedom from Unemployment, Hunger and Homelessness. In October, 1999, they joined with poor and homeless people from across the Americas and marched from Washington, D.C. to the United Nations in New York City, where they submitted a petition to the United Nations charging that welfare reform was a violation of human rights, as defined both in the Declaration of Independence's call for the entitlement to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and in Articles 23, 25, and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the United Nations adopted on December 10, 1948.¹⁴ The group's thirtieth anniversary celebration of the PPC in 1999

THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN. Cited from <http://205.144.224.5/documents/1998/HC/HC0162IN.htm> (accessed April 4, 2007).

¹³ "Civil Rights Campaign." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 29, 1998, Sunday, TWO STAR EDITION

¹⁴ See <http://www.weap.org/ppehr/ppehr.html> (accessed April 4, 2007). Article 23 declares that everyone has the right to work, to choose their employment, to receive equal pay for equal work, to join unions, and to a just, living wage. Article 25 declares that all human beings have the right to "a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services," as well as the right to insurance if unable to work or care for oneself. Article 26 declares the right of everyone to a free education, at least through elementary stages, that promotes "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

gained the attention of a few journalists¹⁵ and their creation of “Bushville” at the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia made some headlines,¹⁶ but the poverty protests of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century did not garner the attention of the 1968 campaign, perhaps because there were so many different movements protesting the presidential candidate, each vying for the media’s attention.

In August of 2003, Resurrection City was resurrected on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign. The PPEHRC retraced the initial path of the Mule Train, as they left out of Marks, Mississippi on August 2 marching to Washington where they planned another “Bushville.” As the group headed out of Marks, the rain came pouring down on activists, just as it had thirty-five years before. The twenty-first century poverty protesters marched for three days in the Mississippi Delta, making their way from Marks to Batesville, a trip that by car takes just over a half an hour. The weary marchers traveled from Batesville, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee, where they stopped to hold a demonstration and then rest. In each city along the way, the group established a camp to expose poverty and homelessness. Like the 1968 PPC’s participants, these anti-poverty activists met with local grassroots organizations and offered to represent their local issues through the campaign’s national forum. In

¹⁵ Dan Hardy, “A March for Those Who Have No Voice,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 15, 1999, B1.

Robin Shulman, “Poor But Not Powerless,” *Village Voice*, November 9, 1999; City State, 23; “Anti-Poverty Marchers to End Long Trek With Rally at U.N.,” *The Record*, Bergen County, NJ, November 2, 1999, L13.

¹⁶ Bart Jansen, “Protesters Outline Plans for Republican, Democratic Conventions,” Associated Press, July 6, 2000; Peter Noel, “Monday Morning Coming Down,” *Village Voice*, August 8, 2000, 45; Todd Spangler, “Encampment, March to Draw Attention to Homelessness,” Associated Press, July 31, 2000.

Nashville, the activists marched almost thirty miles through the city and then camped-in at the War Memorial Plaza. From Nashville, the PPEHRC activists traveled to Louisville where they held a protest at the state capitol and met with activists from the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, a diverse coalition of local activists.¹⁷ After traveling to Georgia, where they spent a restful night in an Atlanta area hotel, the group headed to Knoxville, Tennessee, where they marched eight miles down Martin Luther King Blvd. to the Austin Homes housing project where the activists split into teams to interview residents and document violations of their economic human rights.

Most of the problems poor people faced in 1968 remain the same in the early twenty-first century, but some aspects of the economic system have changed. While deindustrialization caused widespread unemployment as workers shifted from an industrial to a service economy, the contemporary poor face problems related to the globalization of the market, such as outsourcing. The PPEHRC stopped in Kannapolis, North Carolina, where they held a camp-in at the site of the abandoned Pillowtex plant and deemed it NAFTAville in support of UNITE local 1501 and the 6,450 workers fired from this plant after the company filed for bankruptcy due to its inability to compete with cheap labor in foreign markets. When four protesters refused to leave the site after threats from the police, they were arrested but quickly bailed out of jail. The demonstration reflected the pervasive reality of poverty in the twenty-first century as jobs continue to flow overseas, prompting the continued rise of unemployment rates in the United States.

¹⁷ This coalition included that included the Justice Resource Center, an anti-police brutality organization), Kentucky Jobs with Justice, Women in Transition, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 227, Interfaith Paths to Peace, Democracy Resource Center Urban Spirit,

After a restful night in Raleigh/Durham, the PPEHRC moved on into the heart of Appalachia, where poverty was first “discovered” in the 1960s. They stopped in Clinchco, Virginia, where they met with activists from the United Mine Workers Association and the Appalachian Women’s Alliance, whose Mission Statement declared:

“We have lost our people to the Trail of Tears, to explosions in the coal mines, to feuds, to black lung and brown lung, to hunger, to alcohol and drugs, to class and race murder, to domestic violence. We have lost our land to coal companies, land companies, and timber companies that take from us and do not give back. We have suffered the poverty of poor education, corrupt government, inadequate health care, unemployment and domestic violence. Poverty has driven many of us out of the mountains to cities where our children are taught to despise their heritage and abandon their culture. APPALACHIAN WOMEN ARE BUILDING A MOVEMENT AGAINST the forces of poverty, Appalachian women have created brave and triumphant traditions of resistance and change. ... We are accomplishing the excruciatingly slow but steady work of raising consciousness and self-esteem, identifying common struggles, developing a collective analysis, creating a common vision, and taking collective action [emphasis in original].”¹⁸

Appalachia has remained a region highly susceptible to the highs and lows of particular industries, such as mining, and the legacy of poverty in this area persists despite their attempts to build coalitions with other poor people.

On August 23, 2003, the fortieth anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the PPEHRC moved into the nation’s capital. The restrictions placed on the PPEHRC were much stricter than those imposed on the 1968 movement, demonstrating the shift in politics towards the Right. The PPEHRC’s permit was for a mere thirteen hours, despite months of negotiations with Washington officials, but the activists were determined to make their mark on the capital. After participating in the

Southerners on New Ground, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 2629.

fortieth anniversary celebration of the March on Washington, which the PPEHRC had to fight to have their voices included, they moved onto the National Mall and built another “Bushville,” replicating the efforts of the activists who built Resurrection City and the poor people who established Hoovervilles during the Great Depression, to protest an inept president’s inability to cope with crisis. Despite this display on the Mall, the PPEHRC’s memorial to the 1968 movement garnered virtually no attention from the media.¹⁹

After a night filled with constant harassment from the police, the PPEHRC was forced off of the Mall as the law enforcement officers destroyed Bushville and arrested the seventeen remaining activists who refused to leave. Those not arrested moved into D.C. neighborhoods to record the economic human rights violations residents had experienced.²⁰ When the PPEHRC replicated “Bushville” yet again in 2004 in a vacant lot off of Nostrand Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn as part of widespread the protests held in New York City during the Republican National Convention at the RNC, their protest was just one in a long list of radical activists creatively demanding a new direction. As the fortieth anniversary of the PPC quickly approaches there are sure to be more reenactments of and memorials to this important yet neglected campaign. As more and more people fall below the poverty line, this multiracial anti-poverty movement becomes increasingly significant as a model for new movements.

¹⁸ Poor People’s March for Economic Human Rights, <http://www.kwru.org/march/updates.html> (accessed April 4, 2007).

¹⁹ A LexisNexis search produced articles on the other campaigns but absolutely nothing on the 2003 anniversary of the PPC.

²⁰ Ibid.

POVERTY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Throughout the history of the United States poverty has been discovered and rediscovered again and again, but in the twenty-first century it has taken a massive natural disaster to awaken the nation to poverty. At the dawn of the new millennium, journalist James Fallow bemoaned the lack of attention the public and politicians give to poverty in “The Invisible Poor.” Fallow argues that this neglect is the result of an ever-widening gap between rich and poor and that the solution is to make the poor more visible so that they can be helped.²¹ Yet the editors of *The New Poverty Studies* suggest that in this era, like the past, the poor are not so much invisible as they are ignored or maligned:

Indeed, neither the rise of gated middle-class communities nor the advent of policies designed to remove homeless people forcibly from public space has managed to erase poverty from the cultural, political, and geographic landscape. Thus, the problem lies not in poor people’s invisibility but in the terms on which they are permitted to be visible in public discourse . . . They are not permitted full political, economic, or moral citizenship. Alternatively pitied and reviled, they are peculiarly *in* U.S. society but not *of* it.²²

In a country where the vast majority of people claim membership in the “great middle-class,” the poor are constructed as the “Other.”

Whether they are visible or not, the poor have remained unseen and ignored during the initial years of the twenty-first century. Urban residents typically walk past the homeless, avoiding eye contact, either out of fear or to protect themselves from panhandling. Despite legal desegregation, our neighborhoods remain both racially and economically segregated, and our highways enable most urban dwellers to avoid

²¹ See James Fallow, “The Invisible Poor.” *New York Times Magazine* (March 19, 2000): 68-78.

²² Judith Goode and Jeff Maskovsky, ed., *The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics, and Impoverished People in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), vii, 2-3.

encounters with most rural pockets of poverty. Most Americans remain simply unaware of the extent of poverty. Yet, the most recent U.S. Census Bureau documented that in 2005 thirty-seven million people were living in poverty. The median family income for African Americans and Latinos remains almost half of that of whites, causing a disproportionate percentage of people of color to continue to be poor.²³ Poverty not only persists in the United States, the nation's poor are worse off than the poor in any other developed nation due to greater inequality in income distribution, low wages, a high percentage of single-parent families, an unprogressive tax structure, and weak and often misguided attempts to combat poverty.²⁴

Although today we speak of the “underclass,” the “homeless,” the “welfare queen,” and as of late, the Katrina “refugee” or the “illegal immigrant,” the poor are still maligned, and these labels continue to obscure the structural and exploitative roots of poverty while most continue to blame the poor for their condition.²⁵ Today, the poor remain visible on our city streets, but it took a hurricane of historic proportions and a catastrophic aftermath for the media to reawaken the nation, however briefly, to the issue of poverty. While it took days for the federal government to arrive and provide assistance to thousands of terrified, tired, hungry, distraught citizens, the media immediately swooped into New Orleans. Those who were left behind were the city's poor, and for the first time in several decades class and race were discussed openly as the

²³ See U.S. Census Bureau Poverty Highlights: 2005 at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty05/pov05hi.html>.

²⁴ Garth L. Mangum, Stephen L. Mangum, and Andrew M. Sum, *The Persistence of Poverty in the United States* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

cataclysm dominated the twenty-four hour news cycle. The recent Katrina catastrophe and its horrific aftermath forced the nation to acknowledge that poverty persists and that people of color and women of all races still experience poverty in the United States in disproportionate numbers. And while the images of Katrina victims moved the nation to act, although appallingly late and all too temporarily, many of these images also reinforced age-old stereotypes of the poor and binary classifications of deserving and undeserving poor.²⁶ A few media figures have continued to address this grave socioeconomic reality in the wake of Katrina, but these issues quickly faded from the headlines.²⁷

While Marks, Mississippi did not suffer from the effects of Katrina, it has suffered economically in the past decade. Many of the PPC participants from Marks touted the positive effects the PPC and the Mule Train had on Quitman County, but all of those interviewed bemoaned what has happened to Marks in recent years. Marks once was the cultural and economic hub of the county, despite its status as the poorest county in the nation, but today the small Delta town is an economic disaster.

In 2006, Booker Wright, Jr. recounted the transformation he has witnessed during his life in Marks: “During this era, Batesville didn’t have many stores. This was the place. This was the center. You had grocery stores, two movie theaters. This was the town. Look at Marks now. Look at Batesville now. I feel let down.” Batesville, which

²⁵ For the most recent example see reports of Bill Cosby’s attacks on poor blacks, see the scholarship of Michael Eric Dyson who has produced several articles and a book to try to counter Cosby’s effect.

²⁶ The categorization of white New Orleans residents as finders of necessities, while black citizens were labeled looters serves as a recent example of such binary categorizations.

is located just off Interstate 55 about an hour south from Memphis, is a short distance from Marks, but there is a sharp contrast between the two Delta towns. Today, Batesville has many restaurants, hotels, and shops, while Marks is unable to keep local businesses going. Wright explains that the “interstate has a lot to do it,” but he attributes the differences in Batesville and Marks to a combination of a shift in individuals’ priorities and the white power structure’s dominance in the Delta:

Back then very few people had cars. Now people have two or three cars per household. Things that should have been put in place to make this a better place hadn’t been done. People’s not focused in the right direction . . . By this being the Delta, a lot of people kept poor people down to keep them on the farm, wouldn’t let different industries in because of the farm . . . A few families controlled everything . . . To rejuvenate this town, I’ll never see it.²⁸

While economic changes and the rise of a post-industrial, post-agricultural service economy have hurt Marks’ black population, there are other factors that have further circumscribed their opportunities and have kept the majority of both blacks and whites in Marks poor.

The system of complete domination that existed during the 1960s no longer remains in Marks, but racism persists. Samuel McCray explains, “There’s a real resistance. It’s not hostile in terms of people calling people names anymore. We’ve gotten sophisticated, so now people are real nice about it.”²⁹ He suggests that while the local churches have experienced some success with voluntary integration, desegregating the schools is an ongoing struggle. Like many other southern towns, by 1975 all of the black students in Quitman County were attending public schools, while the vast majority

²⁷ There have been a handful of media figures that have tried to maintain interest in race and class post-Katrina, such as Spike Lee, Oprah Winfrey, Anderson Cooper, and Mos Def.

²⁸ Booker Wright, Jr. Interview.

of white students attended private academies. McCray illustrates how local white resistance to integrated education has produced negative results for all local youth: “You’ve got white people in this county probably at the numbers of black that live in poverty. It’s high. Some are probably more so, but they will struggle to keep their kids in private schools that academically are not performing any better and in many cases worse.”³⁰ The economic situation in Marks is hard for black and white alike because the town has little to offer.

With the mechanization of agriculture and the shift to a service economy, jobs became scarce and Marks lost its economic base. Today, most of the local residents travel to work at nearby casinos and spend their money at entertainment venues and stores in the larger communities where they work, demonstrating that while they are increasingly physically mobile, their economic mobility is still severely limited if they choose to remain in Marks.³¹ While some are trying to revitalize Marks by promoting tourism based on the town’s involvement in the Mule Train and Poor People’s Campaign, many are despondent about the economic future of their home in a post-industrial, post-agricultural service economy. The irony of promoting the town’s involvement in an anti-poverty movement to promote economic viability is hard to miss. Samuel McCray

²⁹ Samuel McCray Interview.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Booker Wright, Jr. Interview. Marks native and Mississippi historian Hilliard Lackey has a different perspective on the effect of the casinos: “The presence of eleven gaming casinos in neighboring counties, Washington, Tunica, and Coahoma, in the mid 1990s lifted the burden of abject poverty and provided gainful employment for many Deltans. Quitman County readily reaped the benefits. Scores of local residents became commuting employees of the Grand Casino, Sam’s Town, and the like. Their new income translated into new dollars on the homefront, which produced new stores, shops, and other businesses. Yet, the new millennium approached with Quitman County still ranked the poorest county in the nation.” See Lackey 161.

explains that getting the entire community to memorialize the Mule Train has been a struggle; local whites have even protested the small billboard posted at the town's entrance that designates it as the home of the Mule Train. While using the town's participation in this anti-poverty campaign to promote tourism might be problematic, many residents insist on preserving the past for younger generations. In October of 1997 during the planning stages for the thirtieth anniversary of the PPC, Bertha Burres Johnson explained:

“Most young people around here today don't think that something like the Mule Train leaving here really happened. But I am really excited about folks knowing our history and that we did something that a lot of people thought couldn't be done.”³²

As local communities across the nation begin to construct landmarks to their grassroots struggles the national scope and local details of the civil rights movement become impossible to ignore.

The PPC does not fit with the master-narrative of the movement because it complicates our understanding of SCLC and because it challenges “culture of poverty” arguments about the apathy and disorganization of the poor. Despite its status as the first multiracial, national, antipoverty campaign of the era, the PPC and its Mule Train have been ignored. Looking at the local effects of this national movement challenges past assessments of the PPC and demonstrates the importance of linking the local grassroots campaigns with national movements. Typically, historians have disregarded the PPC or labeled it a failure because it failed to enact legislation that guaranteed citizens a job or income, but those that have studied the local movement in Marks have different criteria

³² Freeman, 115.

for assessing the value of the campaign. Although Roland Freeman was skeptical about the PPC and the Mule Train both before and after his participation, conducting interviews with Mule Train participants, researching the history of the area, and reflecting on his experience has transformed his overall assessment of the movement:

It irreversibly changed the terms of reference and the agenda for change in the United States by incorporating, and then making inseparable, the economic and political dimensions of poverty in America. It also manifested the requirement that the ongoing struggle reach across racial and ethnic lines, and provided an arena to accelerate the process of coalition building. Unfortunately, it also demonstrated the fragility of that process, the amount of prior history and residue that would be made, and the temporal and shifting nature of such alliances . . . Why then does the Poor People's Campaign still seem so amorphous, and why do I—and seemingly many others with whom I spoke—feel so ambivalent about the experience? Perhaps it is because the work that began then is still unfinished thirty years later.³³

Perhaps this is why the PPC has yet to be included into the master-narrative of the movement—if we incorporate those campaigns that challenged the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States and exposed how racism, sexism, and regional exploitation have led to the cyclical poverty that people of color continue to face in disproportionate numbers, then we are forced to recognize that the struggle for economic and racial equality is still unfinished.

On February 22, 2007, the McClatchy Washington Bureau released their analysis of the 2005 U.S. Census statistics, which demonstrated that the number of Americans who are living in severe poverty, almost sixteen million, has climbed to its highest point since 1975. The report explains the complicated nature of our current economy:

The plight of the severely poor is a distressing sidebar to an unusual economic expansion. Worker productivity has increased dramatically since the brief

³³ Freeman, 132.

recession of 2001, but wages and job growth have lagged behind. At the same time, the share of national income going to corporate profits has dwarfed the amount going to wages and salaries. That helps explain why the median household income of working-age families, adjusted for inflation, has fallen for five straight years.³⁴

These factors and other effects of globalization and the increasing concentration of wealth in fewer hands have forced 43% of the nation's 37 million poor into deeper poverty. The statistics demonstrate that women and children remain as the largest percentage of the poor, and that people of color still experience poverty in extremely disproportionate numbers. While Mississippi and Louisiana remain two of the poorest states in the nation, particularly as these states struggle to recover from Hurricane Katrina and its catastrophic aftermath, the nation's capital, the city with the largest black population in the nation, has the highest rate of extreme poverty, with six in ten of D.C. residents mired in severe poverty.³⁵ Another multiracial anti-poverty movement is needed, as the PPC remains America's "unfinished business."

³⁴ The Census defined severe poverty as a family of four with two children and an annual income of less than \$9,903 and individuals who made less than \$5,080 a year. See <http://www.realcities.com/mld/kwashington/16760690.html>

³⁵ See <http://www.realcities.com/mld/kwashington/16760690.html> (accessed April 4, 2007).

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