

# **The Poor People's Campaign: An Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement**

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## **Abstract**

*In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. expanded the scope of Civil Rights activism by (re)defining the problem of social inequality to include all those in the United States who were poor, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Building on the success of the 1963 Civil Rights March in Washington, a similar event was planned to publicize the extent of poverty in America. In addition to the Poor People's March on Washington, the lived experience of the poor was dramatized by the thousands who converged on the national mall to live in makeshift tents in Resurrection City during May and June, 1968. This paper examines the Poor People's Campaign and the way in which the goals of the campaign, which moved from vague rhetoric to specific demands, threatened the security of established societal norms and may have contributed to the failure of the movement to accomplish its goals.*

In the mid 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. expanded the scope of his Civil Rights activism by redefining the problem of social inequality to include all those in the United States who were poor, regardless of their race or ethnicity. An even similar to the 1963 Civil Rights March in Washington was planned by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to publicize the extent of poverty in America. In addition to a single-day Solidarity March in Washington, the lived experience of the poor was dramatized by the thousands of poor people who converged on the national mall to live in makeshift housing known as Resurrection City for six weeks during May and June, 1968. Both the encampment and the march were part of The Poor Peoples Campaign (POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN).

This paper examines the life cycle of POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN by applying the theories of Down, Hahn and Stone. The POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN began in late 1967 with strong public and media support and enthusiastic participants. When it ended in June 1968, the public and the media had lost interest and the participants were discouraged. Martin Luther King, Jr. had deliberately articulated goals that were vague but that required a revolutionary change to the economic and social system in America. After King's death, the next generation of SCLC leaders were not as committed to his revolutionary vision. They lowered the POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN's expectations, asking only for small reforms within the current system. These SCLC leaders also struggled with the organizational aspects of leading such a large campaign. This was most noticeable in their handling of media coverage, the day-to-day operations of Resurrection City, and public sentiment. As a result, the POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN ended with many assuming that it had been a complete disaster since it did not affect the changes to social policy that would improve the quality of life for poor in America.

On December 4, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr., the President of the SCLC, issued an official statement on behalf of the organization that represented a dramatic shift in the mission of this leading civil rights organization. Up until that time, the SCLC had focused their efforts to raise awareness and change policy exclusively on the issue of racial inequality. However, several changes in society occurred simultaneously to shift the focus of the SCLC. First, social unrest among blacks was growing, and a more militant black power movement was gaining strength in urban communities.

## **The Poor People's Campaign: An Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement**

Second, media coverage of the activities of the black power movement, including urban riots, became more extensive, raising public awareness and concern. Third, governmental support to the Great Society Programs intended to provide relief to the nation's "invisible poor", had been annually cut from the federal budget. Fourth, escalation of the United States' role in the conflict in Southeast Asia redirected Johnson's ideological and budgetary focus from the "war on poverty" to the war in Vietnam.

Downs (1972) would consider this the alarmed discovery or second stage in his "Issue-Attention Cycle" of a social issue. In Downs' theory, the public has a predictable pattern of response regarding social issues which begins with the "pre-problem stage" where a serious social condition exists but it has not created enough concern for the public to be interested in it as an issue. By this point in 1967, the issue has already passed the "pre-problem stage", and the public has moved to the second stage of "alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm" (Downs, 1972). The public was aware of and concerned about the growing problem of urban rioting and the problems facing the nation.

King was aware of these problems. He was concerned about the media focus on the militant black movement because it raised fears but also because it diverted attention away from his theatrical and nonviolent approach. He also believed that the concerns of the average American citizens were not reflected in the actions of Congress or the President. He was committed to find a way to bring together various groups in America who were suffering and to focus the attention of the nation on the plight of the poor. As a result, he developed The Poor People's Campaign to bring attention to the fact that poverty was present in all racial and ethnic groups. King's actions were a result of his own moral commitment to the problems of the poor as well as a strategic opportunity of the moment. Research shows that social movement organizations which take advantage of politically opportune situations, adjust their goals and diversity their tactics are more likely to be successful.

King saw the need shifted the focus of the SCLC in response. The SCLC had been successful raising awareness about and developing widespread support for the treatment of blacks in America through the use of tactics such as political protests and nonviolent civil disobedience. By continuing to emphasize his non-violent approach, he sought to distance his organization from the militant black power movement as he continued to use successful tactics. He also had a plan to incorporate new strategies during the Poor People's Campaign.

King developed a three-part strategy for this Campaign. Unlike previous SCLC events that were regionally focused but publicized nationwide, this plan included opportunities for everyone across the nation to get involved while the most theatrical and dramatic events would occur in Washington, DC.

First, several thousand poor people, from different racial backgrounds, were to congregate in Washington, DC and encamp during May and June 1968. The plan was to establish residence on the mall without permission. During the time they were in Washington, they would conduct a major demonstration, similar to the Civil Rights March held in 1963. Another aspect of this first strategy was to hold daily demonstrations throughout the city (Chase, 1998).

The second strategy was to create scenarios during the peaceful demonstrations that would result in mass arrests. He imagined that arrests would occur when they took over the mall without permission, as well as during daily nonviolent protests throughout the city (Chase, 1998). He thought that these actions would attract media coverage and garner public support for the movement.

The third component of King's plan was to invite mass participation across the country. This strategy focused exclusively on economic interests and concerns and involved a national economic boycott of America's most powerful corporations (Chase, 1998).

The SCLC wanted the Poor People's Campaign to be a symbolic gesture to create a massive outpouring of sympathy from America's middle class (Chase, 1998). This support was critical

## The Poor People's Campaign: An Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement

because the movement was dependent upon what Hahn (1994) refers to as the Third Party. There was no guarantee that lawmakers would respond to the demands and pleas of the poor, so it was critical that sympathy and influence of those from the middle class, the Third Party, be garnered to help influence change. To accomplish this, it was important that the demands of the movement be inclusive and vague. Otherwise, as Stone (2002) argues, public support would have been nonexistent and perhaps even aggressively oppositional if the demands were too specific. The SCLC made five demands which they referred to as the "Bill of Economic & Social Rights to Set Poverty on the Road to Extinction" (Chase, 1998):

1. A meaningful job at a living wage for every employable citizen.
2. A secure and adequate income for all who cannot find jobs or for whom employment is inappropriate
3. Access to land as a means to income and livelihood
4. Access to capital as a means of full participation in the economic life of America
5. Recognition by law of the right of people affected by government programs to play a truly significant role in determining how they are designed and carried out.

The middle class could support these vague goals since they did not pose any threat to their personal wellbeing or require any sacrifice by them.

King was able to recruit poor people from across the country to participate in the event that was planned in Washington, D.C. As Hahn (1994) notes, the poor are not inclined to actively protest their situation unless they believe that there is hope that something can change. King, however, had established a reputation as a successful civil rights leader. Based on King's ability to effect change and improve racial conditions in the country, the poor were likely to believe in his vision and trust him to lead them to favorable outcome as well.

During early months of spring of 1968, the SCLC was organizing, gathering publicity and recruiting for the Poor People's Campaign. Then on April 4<sup>th</sup> King was assassinated. The leaders of the SCLC, and the nation, were devastated. Even so, the leaders of the SCLC decided to carry on with the campaign to fulfill their commitment to King's vision. They did so by modifying his goals and strategies. Rev. Ralph Abernathy, a trusted advisor to King, took over as leader of SCLC with a different approach.

While he agreed that a major single-day demonstration was important, he disagreed with King's plan to gather on the mall without permission. Instead, he determined that the goals of the campaign would be better served by establishing an organized city of the poor. Abernathy envisioned this city as an example for the world to see how people from all races could live together peacefully and with mutual respect (McKnight, 1998).

While the make-shift city on the mall in DC and the demonstrations that could occur while the residents were there was intended to be the highlight of the Campaign, the SCLC took advantage of the opportunity to gain publicity and raise awareness as the poor journeyed to DC. This is another tactic that Stone (2002) suggests is powerful when gathering support for a policy. Not only are stories and symbols easy to grasp and to remember, but also they can appeal to an individual on an emotional level.

Nine different caravans, dubbed Freedom Roads, travelled across the country to Washington, DC. They used buses, cars, trains, and even a mule train, and included the poor from all different racial and ethnic groups. As they travelled, some local congregations in some communities invited them to spend the night in their churches. In other communities they were fed and housed by average citizens in private homes (McKnight, 1998). All along the way, the SCLC representatives who were travelling with the caravans would conduct daily workshops on the techniques of nonviolent demonstration to prepare them for DC (McKnight, 1998).

## **The Poor People's Campaign: An Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement**

As they travelled, meeting supporters along the way, those in the caravans became more enthusiastic about their participation. And, for many, it became a life changing experience (Chase, 1998). Hahn (1994) refers to this as an "Identity Altering Experience" when individuals have the opportunity to participate in a movement that "bring[s] meaning to people's lives and enable[s] them to play a role that makes them feel good about themselves" (p. 117).

By the time the caravans arrived in Washington, DC, the media were already well informed since they had followed their journeys across the country. Reporters were prepared to give the Poor People's Campaign extensive and positive publicity. But, there were residents of Resurrection City who were not enthusiastic about having any outsiders in the camp. They treated the reporters rudely, forcing them out of the encampment (McKnight, 1998). From that time forward, the coverage of the Campaign became sporadic and increasingly negative (McKnight, 1998).

This was a major misstep by the leadership of the SCLC. The numbers of poor people who came to Washington, DC to participate in Resurrection City was large, up to several thousand participants, and extremely diverse (McKnight, 1998). Young, black men who were members of inner city gangs were assigned the role of marshals and given the duty to police the city. They may have been overzealous in carrying out those duties and created more problems than necessary through bullying residents, requiring permission to move through the city, and harassing the media (Chase, 1998).

The leaders of the SCLC should have planned for this or at the very least should have stepped in to resolve the conflict with the media as soon as it occurred. As experienced Civil Rights movement leaders, they knew how important it was to have a sympathetic media covering their issues and events. As Hahn (1972) argues, the media is critical to keeping Third Party supporters informed and involved

The change in SCLC leadership also brought confusion and internal conflict about what the goals of the campaign should be. The goals and the spokesmen goals changed several times during the short encampment in Washington. Bayard Rustin, who had organized the successful 1963 Civil Rights March, was invited to organize and prepare the participants for the Solidarity Day March (Chase, 1998). Without consulting with the SCLC leadership, he issued a pragmatic "Call to Americans of Goodwill" which contained an "Economic Bill of Rights" which demanded (McKnight, 1998):

1. Recommitment by the Federal Government to the Full Employment Act of 1946 and legislation for the immediate creation of at least one million socially useful career jobs in public service
2. Adoption of the pending housing and urban development act of 1968
3. Repeal of the 90<sup>th</sup> Congress's punitive welfare restrictions in the 1967 Social Security Act
4. Extension to all farm workers the right, guaranteed under the National Labor Relations Act, to organize agricultural labor unions
5. Restoration of budget cuts for bilingual education, Head Start, summer jobs, Economic Opportunity Act, and Elementary and Secondary Education Acts

Abernathy and the other leaders of the movement immediately denounced these goals. They considered these demands to be too specific and much too limiting to their cause of an economic revolution. Abernathy and other leaders believed that these goals placed the movement into a deferential position with Congress. The conflict within the movement was so great that Ruskin resigned as Solidarity Day March organizer (McKnight, 1998).

While the leadership of the SCLC was focused on resolving the problems with the day-to-day operations of the city and preparations for the Solidarity Day March, congressional and national public

## The Poor People's Campaign: An Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement

opinion was beginning to turn against the campaign. In a poll, 61% of whites were opposed to the Poor People's Campaign because they feared it increase racial violence (Chase, 1998). Much of the rhetoric that fed the fear of the public can be attributed to the documented campaign organized by the FBI and the Park Police to discredit this campaign and to create a state of fear and panic among the general public (McKnight, 1998). At this point, the campaign had moved into Stage 3 of Downs' (1972) "Issue-Attention Cycle" with the public beginning to realize that solving the problem of the poor was too difficult and costs too high.

Sterling Tucker, who at that time was Director of the Washington Urban League, was appointed Ruskin's replacement to organize Solidarity Day (Chase, 1998). To respond to the political and public pressure, the SCLC formulated new goals which were developed by Tucker and were to be announced as part of the Solidarity Day March. These new goals consisted of 49 demands, 22 of which were considered key. Nineteen of these were directly relevant areas under the jurisdiction of the Executive Branch, such as food programs, job programs, education, health services and welfare. Three of the goals were directed at Congress (Chase, 1998):

1. Passage of a bill to create 2.4 million jobs over a 4-yr period
2. Provide \$5.5 billion towards new housing
3. Repeal the new welfare amendments that would freeze federal welfare contributions at the January 1968 level.

The press praised these goals, because they were concrete. But these were a departure from King's original goals, which had been deliberately vague but revolutionary. Ironically, these new goals, embraced by the leadership of the SCLC, were more practical and deferential than those proposed by Ruskin which had been criticized by the SCLC leadership. In fact, these goals were in sync with what the President wanted and matched pieces of legislation already in the pipeline in Congress (Chase, 1998). By putting forth these goals, the SCLC had dramatically reduced the potential impact of the Poor People's Campaign, taking away the opportunity for revolutionary change. In keeping with Stone's (2002) theory, these were goals that would most likely meet with public approval. Unfortunately, these goals and the press' enthusiastic response came too late to generate the support necessary to re-engage the public.

Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the strength of the SCLC was its ability to organize marches and to create theatrical displays for political ends. These tactics included demonstrations and activities where they would bait law enforcement to arrest them (Chase, 1998). What they had no experience doing was coordinating and administering a major city for an extended period of time. While the residents of Resurrection City moved in and out during the 6 week encampment in DC, at times as many as 5,000 individuals were living in the city with an additional 10,000 participating in the Solidarity Day March on May 12<sup>th</sup> (McKnight, 1998). Because the SCLC leadership had not planned for this number of people, they were unable to effectively respond to basic needs like plumbing, electricity and food (McKnight, 1998).

King had known that organizing a city on this scale was beyond their experience and perhaps their ability, which is why it was not in his original plan to have a city established for up to six weeks. His plan in many ways was much simpler: he wanted to bring the poor into Washington, DC, squat on the mall illegally, and get arrested. In addition, he wanted to keep the issue in front of policymakers and the public by holding daily nonviolent protests throughout the city. He knew from experience that these tactics would generate sympathy from the media which would in turn generate support from the masses across the country (McKnight, 1998).

It seems feasible that Abernathy's decision to move the SCLC from arrest/provoking tactics to semi-permanent camp could have worked if only advanced planning and on-site monitoring occurred. On May 13 when Resurrection City officially opened, there was mass support. The entire city was built in a few days with volunteer labor and donated building materials. Abernathy wanted the city to

## The Poor People's Campaign: An Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement

serve as a symbolic reminder to the nation that the goal of the Great Society to declared war on poverty had not produced significant tangible results (McKnight, 1998). His vision was noble: he wanted the city to showcase what poor people were really like and to prove that different people from different backgrounds could live together peacefully with mutual respect for others of all races and colors (McKnight, 1998). Unfortunately, because of lack of planning for the day-to-day needs of the residents and without oversight and management of the various groups within the organization, the city failed to meet his expectations.

This is not to say that all was lost. There are examples of successful tactics for the residents. For example, on May 31<sup>st</sup>, Marian Wright, a well-respected lobbyist in Washington, organized a meeting with a diverse group of residents from Resurrection City and congressional committee members. This official meeting took place in a huge hearing room of new Senate Office Building. The diverse group of residents represented all groups from the campaign: blacks, Mexicans, American Indians, white Appalachians, all of whom shared their situations and were able to articulate with passion the problems poverty posed for them in their lives (Chase, 1998). Gaining access to members of Congress was an important symbolic event. It proved to the poor that they had something worth sharing and it reminded Congress of the reality of life for many of their constituents.

One of the outcomes of having such a diverse group of individuals living together in Resurrection City was the opportunity for cross-cultural interaction and understanding. This was achieved through an intentional multi-cultural program which came to be known as the "Many Races Soul Center" in a tent set up in the center of Resurrection City (Chase, 1998). Through the collaboration of representatives of the SCLC, the Highlander Folk Center and the Smithsonian Institution, cultural activities were organized including such things as making music together and sharing their diverse cultures (Chase, 1998). In addition, universities from throughout the Washington, DC area presented multi-racial educational sessions that focused on issues such as inter-racial division, the demoralizing and violent effects of poverty and strategies to overcome the problems through class-based solidarity (Chase, 1998). Similar to what happened en route to Washington on the Freedom Trails, many members of Resurrection City had an Identity-Altering Experience (Hahn, 1994).

On June 19<sup>th</sup>, the Solidarity Day March occurred with approximately 10,000 marchers participating. Many of the journalists who covered the march that day had also been present at the 1963 march on Washington and noted the contrast between the two events. Solidarity Day, a much smaller event than the 1963 march, was described as a group of individuals who lacked enthusiasm and who had a sense of despair. The movement had now reached stage four of Down's (1972) cycle, exhibiting a gradual decline of intense public interest.

The park permit for Resurrection City expired a few days after the Solidarity March, but by that time most of the residents had already returned to their homes. Some SCLC members and a few dedicated residents remained to conduct one last act of civil disobedience to assure an arrest (McKnight, 1998).

If one assessed the Poor People's Campaign based its original stated goals, it should be declared a failure. But was it, really? Certainly, the leaders and participants were unable to get any response from Congress, either immediately or even within the short term after the campaign ended. The experimental city did not accomplish all that Abernathy had hoped. The Solidarity March did not elicit the same sort of emotion and excitement that the 1963 march had.

It is important to understand that much was working against the Poor People's Campaign. They had to contend with the fact that the President had turned his attention to the war in Vietnam and he did not want the invisible poor to become visible and appear in his backyard on the Washington, DC mall. They also had to face a FBI which was conducting a well-documented, intensive strategic plot to destroy King, the SCLC and the Campaign (McKnight, 1998). Based on the documented FBI

## The Poor People's Campaign: An Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement

conspiracy, the fact that there were no riots nor was there any loss of life during the six weeks that the poor were in Washington, DC, should be considered a success.

By viewing the Poor People's Campaign through a different lens, it is clear that there were many successful outcomes. For example, the Campaign was able to bring together disparate groups to work toward a common goal. Some of these groups had previously been ambivalent to one another and others had been openly hostile. The Freedom Roads that brought the poor to Washington, DC from all across the country were successful achieving wide-spread support from those who interacted with the caravans as well as those who learned about them through the media coverage. Living in Resurrection City and participating in the activities of the Poor People's Campaign was a life changing experience for many of those who attended.

The SCLC may not have been equipped to bring different groups together without King's leadership and perhaps should not have attempted such a major event so quickly after King's assassination. By this point in the late 1960s, the social environment was different from what the organization had experienced when they used these strategies successfully in the Civil Rights campaign of the early 1960s. Although they could have been better prepared, they did attempt new tactics such as Resurrection City, the daily demonstrations and the meetings with decision-makers on Capitol Hill.

They did not accomplish all they set out to do, but they did accomplish some very important things:

- they were able, albeit it briefly, to rally the country around the important issue of poverty
- they were able to bring diverse groups together – groups who were at that time and still are pitted against one another
- many who participated in the campaign left with a greater understanding of and appreciation for one another and their unique circumstances and challenges
- many who participated in the campaign also left more empowered having had an identity-altering experience

By analyzing the successes and failures of the Poor People's Campaign, scholars and activities can understand the way in which both social conditions and movement strategies contribute to social change.

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