

King's Transition from the Struggle for Black Political Rights to Economic Rights for All to Death by Hatred, 1955-1968

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Introduction

Having just recently concluded the first phase of the struggle for civil rights by 1965, the second phase of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s struggle was consumed by his obsession to obliterate poverty in America. This compelled him to oppose the Vietnam War because he felt that the latter war was distracting attention and detracting resources from the former. But by opposing the Vietnam War, Dr. King placed himself in the middle of two wars—the war of imperialism abroad and the war on poverty at home. In both wars he sought to dismantle the prevailing order that was supported by significantly powerful groups. By opposing the Vietnam War and advocating for the War on Poverty, Dr. King simultaneously became the enemy of both the political and economic power brokers of America.

Dr. King's opposition to the Vietnam War would ultimately result in his assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Whether Dr. King was killed as the result of a conspiracy hatched and executed by political, economic and other hideous forces, as some have speculated, is beyond the capacity of this writer to determine. Abundantly clear, however, is that the assassination of Dr. King was inextricably connected to his putsch to end the war in Vietnam and redefine the workings of capitalism in American society. Drawing on his previous success that culminated with the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Dr. King transcended race in his pursuit of justice and real freedom for all Americans. This essay maps out the trajectory of Dr. King's last year on Earth that witnessed the transition of his struggle from political to economic, his personal transformation from mere man to legend, and his eventual premature death resulting from his sense of conviction and love for America. But first some background information about his rise to national prominence.

Background to the Transition

The 1950s-1960s Civil Rights movement in the United States was first and foremost an intellectual revolution that drew its ethos from a long Western tradition of transforming society with ideas dating back to the Italian humanists of the 13th century. Humanism spawned the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, which likewise provided the necessary impetus for the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Although few activists knew the source of the ideas propagated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century, the movement was a direct descendant of the Enlightenment that provided the steam for the American and French revolutions. To this end, Dr. King was a son of the Enlightenment and, like the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment who came before him, he, too, was an advocate for justice and the advancement of humankind.

Initially ignited by the Montgomery Bus Boycott event, the Civil Rights Movement reached its apogee during the 1963 March on Washington—the largest politically-motivated assemblage of humanity at one place at the same time in America's history—whose crowning moment came when Dr. King delivered his electrifying and visionary "I have a Dream" speech. Drawing from the ideas that made the modern Western world and gave birth to the United States of

America, Dr. King tailored his words to the social crisis at hand. His speech penetrated deeply into the soul of America and directly contributed to persuading Congress to pass the civil rights legislation that guaranteed voting rights of the hitherto forgotten Americans of darker hue. That speech also exposed two interlocking variables about the African American who dared to dream so publicly: (1) the power of persuasion that lurked in the small frame of Dr. King; and (2) the revelation that if he was left unchecked the speaker could pose a formidable challenge to the then extant capitalist economic order in America.

After the signing of the Voting Rights Act by President Lyndon B. Johnson in August 1965, however, it became obvious that some measure of success had been attained. This success brought some degree of closure to the first phase of the Civil Rights Movement, which was essentially political and involved principally America's black population. The need for expansion into the economic sphere to include other impoverished and forgotten Americans—Latinos, Amerindians, poor whites and blacks through articulating and executing a new civil rights agenda—naturally intruded itself. Whereas the first phase was political, the second was to be economic. The latter campaign would seek to bring the benefits of the world's richest nation to all of its citizens. But was the quest for inclusion of poor whites and minorities into the wealthy white dominated American economic order attainable? Obviously, this question did seem to matter but Dr. King was progressive enough to understand that the political right to vote was not in and of itself a panacea for freedom. Surely, a homeless and hungry person can hardly be said to be politically free. To be truly free poor Americans would have to be included in a new social contract that guaranteed them a living wage.

Dr. King was thus poised to resolve the contradiction arising from the dichotomy in capitalist America between the *idealism* of political equality and the *realism* of economic inequality. Well-versed in the ideas that made America the first nation-state contrived by the human mind, King methodically undertook to tackle this seemingly intractable contradiction by taking up the question of "economic rights" on behalf of the dispossessed American masses. By embarking on this quest for economic rights for poor Americans, Dr. King placed himself squarely at variance with the established economic interests of the nation. This essay examines how Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) sought to resolve the inherent contradiction between political equality and economic inequality in American society via the medium of the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) organized by Dr. King himself.

The Poor People's Campaign

On December 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. announced the "Poor People's Campaign" (PPC) in Atlanta, Georgia. At the press conference, Dr. King declared to the reporters there assembled that

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference will lead waves of the nation's poor and disinherited to Washington, D.C. next spring to demand redress of their grievances by the United States government and to secure at least jobs or income for all. We will go there, we will demand to be heard, and we will stay until America responds. If this means forcible repression of our movement we will confront it, for we have done this before. If this means scorn or ridicule we embrace it, for that is what America's poor now receive. If it means jail we accept it willingly, for the millions of poor already are imprisoned by exploitation and discrimination (See "Press conference announcing the Poor People's Campaign," Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.¹)

¹ See www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications

Barely four years after the successful 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington, this announcement signaled the beginning of the transition of Dr. King's struggle from political equality among America's races to some degree of redistribution of wealth among America's classes, from the haves to the have-nots. This transition was bold in conception and equally bold in its proposed method of execution. It sent off alarm bells, which rang in the ears of the traditional "liberal consensus"—comprised of blue-collar democrats, a collection of liberal intellectuals and the press, policy makers, progressive-minded businessmen, church leaders, and students—that had lent support to the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington.

The proposed PPC was in fact progressive in its orientation but, unlike the African American civil rights struggle that was embraced by many Americans, it ran counter to the philosophy of the "liberal consensus" enshrined in the belief that "American capitalism was a revolutionary force for social change, that economic growth was supremely good because it obviated the need for redistribution and social conflict, that class had no place in American politics."² In the eyes of those whites who had supported the March on Washington in August 1963, the Civil Rights movement was in accordance with, and an affirmation of, the liberal faith. Nothing in the ideas of the movement at that stage seemed to contradict the liberal orthodoxy. The political phase of the Civil Rights Movement's goal to integrate blacks more fully into white society was championed by the liberal consensus, stretching from the White House, labor, churches, and intellectuals, to sectors of the business community. There was hope, as late as the fall of 1963, that integration could be achieved without posing a challenge to the basic structure of white society.³

As long as white liberals controlled the agenda of the civil rights struggle, all was well. But no sooner the SCLC began to articulate a course of action at variance with the "liberal consensus" than the *liberal reaction* set in. Professor Manning Marable has noted that "effective power is never exercised solely by a single race, but by a dominant social class. Thus Black political movements are simultaneously movements that seek to restructure or radically transform class relations."⁴

Dr Martin Luther King understood just too well what needed to be done to alter the negative sides of both race and class relations in American society. Where he might have miscalculated was in the timing of the launching of his Poor People's Campaign. At the height of the Vietnam War, Dr. King's simultaneous opposition to the war and his linking of the Vietnam War to the War on Poverty in America meant that he was not only alienating the liberal consensus that had been instrumental in the civil rights gains, but also that the hostile right could now find common ground with liberals in their opposition to the PPC.

Vietnam War and the Fracturing of the Civil Rights Coalition

Following the Meredith, Mississippi March in 1966, the slogan "black power" became a distinct philosophy that contrasted sharply with King's ideas of integration. In 1965, national issues arising from the Vietnam War coupled with African American frustration with respect to a

² Geoffrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon What Happened and Why* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 89.

³ *Ibid.*, p.179.

⁴ *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London: Verso, 1985), p. vii.

perceived stagnation of goals and progress in the movement confounded King and the SCLC staff.⁵ When on March 2, 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson launched “Operation Rolling Thunder” that occasioned the bombing of North Vietnam, in a speech at Howard University Dr. King openly questioned U.S. policy in Vietnam and called for a negotiated settlement. Not wishing to provoke Johnson for fear that the president might turn against the Civil Rights movement, Dr. King exercised caution and did not fully rebuke U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia.

Like King, other civil rights leaders were well aware of the politics of collaboration that entailed support for the black civil rights struggle in exchange for black silence on the Vietnam War. Consequently, Whitney Young of the Urban League noted that “Johnson needs a consensus. If we are not with him on the Vietnam War, then he is not going to be with us on Civil Rights,”⁶ When the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) publicly denounced the Vietnam War in 1966, Dr. King neither issued a statement of support nor did he join the rising chorus of Civil Rights leaders condemning the SNCC. Speaking for the Urban League, Young stated that his group would renounce Civil Rights organizations that “formally adopted black power as a program, or which [tied] domestic rights with the Vietnam conflict.” Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) similarly remarked on the SNCC’s position against the war by labeling them as “only one of many civil rights groups,” and added that their statement was “not the statement of other groups of what is loosely called the Civil Rights movement.”⁷

Dr. King was slow in condemning the war in Vietnam, even as he progressively moved toward a position that coupled the war with the social spending programs at home. Accordingly, in April 1966 Dr. King and the SCLC board passed a resolution condemning the Vietnam War. In August of that same year at the SCLC annual convention that met in Augusta, the organization called for immediate and unilateral de-escalation of the Vietnam conflict. Concerned with the plight of the poor, King proposed three initiatives for the organization during an SCLC strategy session in October 1966. One of these called for the organizing of America’s impoverished towards a “crusade to reform society in order to realize economic and social justice.” In November of that year, King spoke at Howard University and told his audience that African Americans needed to confront “basic issues between the privileged and the underprivileged.” While lending his support to Byard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph’s 1966 “Freedom Budget” that asked for a guaranteed annual wage,⁸ King’s transition from civil rights for African Americans to human rights for all impoverished Americans culminated with his speech against the Vietnam War at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967.

⁵ Robert T. Chase, “Class Resurrection: The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City.” *Essays in History*. Volume Forty. Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia, 1998), p. 3.

⁶ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), pp. 23-25; Young quoted in James Forman, *The Making of a Black Revolutionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 309.

⁷ Young and Wilkins, quoted in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer (eds.), *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 339.

⁸ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), pp. 539-540.

Entitled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence,” King noted with particular emphasis the link between the war in Vietnam and the War on Poverty in America that,

Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.⁹

Consequently, by Dr. King who had by 1967 concluded that ending the war in Vietnam was a moral imperative, and thus could draw a clear link between the war in Vietnam and the need for a real “war on poverty” at home.¹⁰ The proposed PCC, at least for Dr. King and the SCLC, was an appropriate strategy for winning the “war on poverty” at home. To this end, the quest for African American civil rights was effectively subordinated to the human rights of America’s poor of all races.

Strategizing for the Poor People’s Campaign

After the passage and signing of the civil rights legislation in 1964, the emergence of Black Power and abating of urban riots the previous summer, the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference met in November 1967 to discuss a new direction of their movement. From these discussions sprung the idea for the Poor People’s Campaign. As leader of the SCLC, Dr. Martin Luther King was barely 38 years old in 1967. His calling to uplift America’s poor and disinherited may well have been providential. Yet he was by no means oblivious to the difficulty of the task that lay ahead. King knew that a multi-racial poor people’s movement aimed at redistributing America’s wealth might prove more daunting to build than the non-violent tactics employed by blacks with a uniform history of suffering to end legal segregation in the South. King was obviously moving toward a new direction, a direction few Americans were willing to veer toward in 1967. Although many Americans were opposed to the Vietnam War without equating it with issues of class and poverty in America, Dr. King believed that there was an intrinsic relationship between the federal expenditure on an “immoral war” and the paucity of funds to spend on President Johnson “war on poverty.” In an interview with Jose Yglesias, “King explained that although the cost to the nation of wiping out poverty had not been reduced to a dollar figure, the war in Vietnam—this unjust and immoral war,’ as he always characterized it—cannot be waged if the campaign’s demands are met.”¹¹

⁹ See “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” By Martin Luther King, 4 April 1967. BRC-News list at <http://www.ssc.msu.edu/~sw/mlk/brksInc.htm>

¹⁰ Chase, “Class Resurrection,” p. 3.

¹¹ Jose Yglesias, *New York Times Magazine*, March 31, 1967.

The proposed PPC march on Washington was planned for early April 1968. The SCLC was to organize people to move on Washington from ten major cities and five rural areas. It was to be no ordinary march, “no mere one-day march in Washington but a trek to the nation’s capital by suffering and outraged citizens who will go to stay until some definite and positive action is taken to provide jobs and income for the poor.”¹² The campaign was to entail a massive dislocation without destroying life or property, but consciously designed to dramatize the situation, and “channelize the very legitimate and understandable rage of the ghetto...”¹³

Expectedly, King’s call for a poor people’s campaign—which was essentially a coalition based on class and race that called for militant non-violent confrontation—did not sit well with members of the liberal establishment. The reluctance of many Americans to embrace this approach was understandable. Americans have always been averse to class wars. They pride themselves as a classless society in which the greater majority belong in the amorphous middle class. Dr. King’s “poor people’s campaign” therefore posed a direct challenge to an American myth that articulated a non-existent economic equality that drew its ethos from America’s democratic principle of political equality. It is no wonder that members of the liberal press, who had hitherto supported the Civil Rights movement, immediately took to expressing their discontent with King’s “poor people’s campaign.” A *New York Times* editorial responded to Dr. King’s new campaign as follows:

Like the threat to ‘close down’ Federal induction centers, Dr. Martin Luther King’s plan to seek ‘massive dislocation’ of the national capital violates the principles of responsible protest. Dr. King insists that the massive civil disobedience campaign he plans in Washington next April will be nonviolent. But his proclaimed goal of massive dislocation belies Dr. King’s profession of peaceful intent. If such a result were achieved, by whatever means, it would probably involve some overt violence and it would certainly violate the rights of thousands of Washingtonians and the interests of millions of Americans. This is one more case in which the means are not justified by the end.”¹⁴

In other words, the *New York Times* was opposed to King’s “poor people’s campaign” and its opposition was also class-based. It feared that the rabble of society, if brought in huge numbers to Washington, D.C., might end up resorting to violence. Such violence would disrupt the accustomed way of life of the bourgeoisie who had worked hard for what they had and were not ready to share their wealth with America’s poor.

For what it is worth, the leadership of the SCLC was very progressive in its thinking than many Americans. The late-Rev. Hosea Williams, the PPC’s “political action” director, had captured the essence of this new orientation of SCLC rather eloquently, when he accurately analyzed the situation at hand thusly:

We will never get free by eliminating racism or bringing about integration. If black people were able to eliminate every aspect of racism and integrate every aspect of American life, we would not be free. Black folks will never be free until we have our fair share of the economy. We live not in a political society, nor in a

¹² Press conference announcing the Poor People’s Campaign. December 4, 1967, Atlanta, Georgia. Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ *New York Times* Editorial, “The Responsibility of Dissent,” December 6, 1967, p. 46.

social society, nor a religious society, we live in an economic society. So we had to launch a movement to gain our fair share of the economy.¹⁵

Contextualizing the Struggle in Time Perspective

To understand why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated short of unveiling the actual actors who orchestrated his assassination, we need to place the struggle he led within the context of his times as well as the then prevailing national political and economic values. The United States of America was founded on laissez capitalism, which from the onset established a high wall separating the government and the economy. Over time Americans have come to believe that capitalism provided an avenue of upward mobility to all, hence capitalism obviates the need for redistribution of wealth through socialist experiments. Consequently, Dr. King's "Poor People's Campaign" posed a challenge that portended a viable threat to the prevailing American economic ideology of laissez-faire capitalism. By proposing a redistribution of wealth in a country that did not espouse such an idea and in fact felt that such an idea was contrary to American values, Dr. King effectively placed himself in direct opposition to the guardians of the American system.

Timing is important in everything that human beings do. The timing of the "Poor People's Campaign" could not have come at a less propitious moment. The 1960s saw the United States and the Soviet Union embroiled in a Cold War, a period of global tension brought to the fore by two hostile camps representing two contending economic ideologies of capitalism and communism. Each of the two major powers were determined to spread their ideology across the globe. In the ideologically-ridden atmosphere of the time, one was either for or against the American Way. It was therefore not the content of King's ideas that mattered as much as how he was perceived by those who mattered.

Granted, the contradiction between political equality and economic inequality within the context of a democratic society is yet to be resolved. Whether it was King's desire to force this resolution on American society is not clear. What is clear is that for good or ill, Dr. King had made himself the ultimate anti-establishment man on two important fronts: his opposition to the Vietnam War and his proposal to alter the economic arrangement of American society. Never before in American history has an ordinary black preacher risen to such prominence; never has a black-skinned American been so able to galvanize American citizens to mass action with mere words. An exceptionally well-educated man who understood the power of Western revolutionary ideas and knew how to use them, Martin Luther King, Jr. was deemed a dangerous man who had to be eliminated. Incidentally, his campaigns were executed during a troubling period of political assassinations in America's history.

The 1960s was a period in America's political history in which political assassinations were rampant. One cannot but wonder whether these assassinations were not linked to the Civil Rights aspirations of African Americans, especially when viewed from the vantage point of the individuals who were assassinated. Medgar Evers was assassinated on June 12, 1963; President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963; Malcolm X in 1965; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968; and Robert Kennedy on June 5, 1968. All these men were involved with the civil rights movements in varying degrees, either as activists or sympathizers. Whether the plots to eliminate these men were in any way connected, whether their deaths were the result of a concerted conspiracy, whether they were killed as a result of the convergence of hatred against African American aspirations, is not clear. But all five men were all killed within a time span of five years.

The Man Who Defied Death

¹⁵ Reverend Hosea Williams, interview with Robert T. Chase. See Chase, "Class Resurrection," p. 5.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was barely 26 years old when he was catapulted to the position of spokesman charged with articulating the aspirations of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. There are few instances in history when a man so young has been invested with such a heavy burden. Martin was neither the man for the time nor the man for the responsibility that was suddenly thrust on him. He was too young to shoulder the great American burden of *racism* more than 300 years in the making. The times caught up with him, entangled him, and thus the young preacher, unable to disentangle himself from that web of historical destiny, was swept by the whirlwind of his calling. His people called him to service, and Martin answered their call. Barely thirteen years (1955-1968) into the mission that destiny had ordained for him, the eloquent and compelling young preacher's promising life was cut short by deep, ingrained hatred. Today, however, we cannot but ask these questions: Why was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. killed? And why did the Civil Rights Movement die with him, even though his legacy lives on?

Chronology of the Poor People's Campaign (PPC)

November 1967	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the staff of SCLC met to discuss the direction of the Civil Rights Movement after the passage and signing of civil rights legislation, the emergence of Black Power, and the urban riots of the previous summer. • The SCLC decided to launch the Poor People's Campaign, a movement to address economic equalities with nonviolent direct action.
Dec. 4, 1967	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. King announced the Poor People's Campaign at a Press conference in Atlanta, indicating that it will be set in motion in early April 1968
Measure of the PPC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The SCLC planned the PPC to be the "second phase" of the civil rights struggle, involving poor blacks, American Indians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites. It was to be the most massive campaign of civil disobedience, causing complete dislocation in Washington, D.C. in order to dramatize and compel government to address the issue of poverty in American society.
April 4, 1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfortunately, Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was attending a rally for the city's sanitation workers' strike
May 12 – June 19, 1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After Dr. King's death leadership of the SCLC passed on to the Rev. Ralph Abernathy. The King family and SCLC leadership decided to carry out the PPC campaign in honor of the slain leader. On May 12, the first wave of demonstrators descended on Washington, D.C. • A week later <i>Resurrection City</i>, a settlement of tents and shacks to house the protesters, was built on the Washington Mall. • Demonstrators were sent out to various government agencies to protest and spread the message of the campaign.
Demands of the Campaign	<p>Specifically, the campaign requested a \$30 billion anti-poverty package that would include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A commitment to full employment • A guaranteed annual income measure • Increased construction of low income housing

Ineffectiveness of the Campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ralph Abernathy lacked the inspirational qualities of King• The national press was opposed to PPC• Robert Kennedy was assassinated• Overwhelming number of protesters (7,000 at its peak) undermined the campaign's effectiveness• Failing to move legislators to action, the PPC closed camp on June 19, 1968.
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