



Washington History in the Classroom

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Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.





More than a March

The Poor People's Campaign in the District

BY LAUREN PEARLMAN

Five years after the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his renowned “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Reverend Ralph Abernathy walked to a lectern placed in front of the Lincoln Memorial. The new leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had big shoes to fill. He had persuaded the organization to proceed with its Poor People’s Campaign even though King’s assassination had occurred only two months earlier. Now, on June 19, 1968, more than 50,000 people listened as he gave a rousing speech on Solidarity Day, the campaign’s capstone event.

Originally scheduled for April 1968, the Poor People’s Campaign was the first nationally oriented civil rights demonstration to take place in the nation’s capital since the 1963 March on Washington. It marked King’s desire to broaden the black freedom struggle into a larger human rights struggle. Inviting a wide cross-section of citizens to participate—including American Indians, Puerto Ricans, and people of Mexican descent—SCLC reached beyond the traditional civil rights coalition to train the spotlight on conditions in America’s ghettos and the systemic poverty that plagued

the nation. Moreover, in building and living in Resurrection City, a shantytown on the National Mall and in view of the Lincoln Memorial, SCLC pushed the imaginative boundaries of African American protest. And yet the enduring impression of the Poor People’s Campaign is one of failure, part of the tumultuous decline of the national civil rights movement.¹

The complexities of the Poor People’s Campaign are best understood within the local context of Washington, D.C. As D.C. officials and business groups became aware of SCLC’s plans for another march on Washington in early 1968, they grew anxious about the potential for violence. Leaders of these groups, along with conservative national lawmakers, demanded that the federal government use its powers to contain the Poor People’s Campaign. These calls grew deafening after the devastating civil disturbances triggered by King’s assassination on April 4th left 12 people dead and more than 1,000 injured in Washington alone, as well as an estimated \$15 million in property damage, primarily in the city’s black neighborhoods. President Lyndon B. Johnson, roundly criticized for his handling of the April riots, would waste little time in containing the Poor People’s Campaign,

Organizers of the Poor People’s Campaign built Resurrection City parallel to the Reflecting Pool on the National Mall. For six weeks, more than a thousand protesters lived in plywood-and-canvas shanties to bring national attention to the plight of the poor. At right are World War I-era “temporary” offices that remained until the early 1970s. Courtesy, Jack Rottier photograph collection, Special Collections, George Mason University Libraries.

including using federal troops, surveillance tactics, and, on occasion, preemptive violence to manage lawlessness. The formidable reaction of the White House, Department of Justice, and local government officials shows how SCLC's campaign did not reflect the rapid decline of the civil rights movement so much as the ascendance of law and order measures intended to curb black activism in D.C. and around the country.²

The Poor People's Campaign had a profound, and largely negative, impact on the District of Columbia and its residents. In May, 3,000 participants arrived to set up temporary living quarters along the National Mall in a city still reeling from the April riots. SCLC waged a campaign run primarily by white organizers who focused on national concerns and ignored Washington's radical voices, racial tensions, and local organizations. When participants left the city in June, just six weeks after they arrived, District residents were left to handle the campaign's remnants and repercussions—including increased tensions with the local police department—in relative isolation.

The Poor People's Campaign was conceived by SCLC, under the direction of Martin Luther King, during a five-day retreat in November 1967. Originally called the Washington Spring Project, the event—part mass demonstration and part lobbying program—was designed to draw attention to American poverty in all of its diversity. It would,

King said in December 1967, bring “waves of the nation's poor and disinherited to Washington, D.C. . . . to demand redress of their grievances by the United States government and to secure at least jobs or income for all.” King and his aides envisioned placing on the National Mall a shantytown dubbed “Resurrection City,” much like the one constructed by World War I veterans during the 1932 Bonus Army March. Located in the federal government's front yard, Resurrection City would showcase unity among a multi-ethnic coalition of poor people and would serve as a strategic launch pad for protests, marches, and civil disobedience. In the capital, in front of the nation's starkest symbols of power, the poor would demand to be heard and would, King suggested, “stay until America responds.”³

SCLC chose the capital for its campaign knowing that it had been the perfect stage for the 1963 March on Washington. Washington had delivered a national platform for King and his fellow civil rights leaders, visibility for racial justice issues, and support for then-pending civil rights legislation. The interracial marchers had conducted themselves peacefully and won widespread approval. Much to the consternation of some black activists, however, SCLC organizers had exercised tight control over the 1963 march in order to avoid embarrassing the supportive Kennedy Administration. Shortly before Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader John Lewis

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference established a command post at 14th and U Streets, NW, to promote the Poor People's Campaign. Organizers initially struggled to win local support. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*



took the stage, for example, the march's chairmen demanded that he excise "militant language" from his speech. The Justice Department was prepared to cut power to the microphone if Lewis did not comply. Lewis agreed to tone down his rhetoric. The strict control over the closely scripted event, as well as the coordination between civil rights leaders and the Kennedy administration, helped ensure a peaceful, non-militant march that cemented the National Mall as a symbolic—and even safe—site for civil rights activism.⁴

Yet no one, especially not SCLC, wanted the Poor People's Campaign to be simply a sequel to the March on Washington. This time the protesters were not going to D.C. to support proposed legislation, they were not speaking for blacks alone but for all poor people, and they did not have the blessing of an approving presidential administration.

Much had changed between 1963 and 1968. The 1963 March on Washington had helped generate support for what became the 1964 Civil Rights and 1965 Voting Rights Acts, which prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations and voting. Yet these legislative victories did not end structural economic and political inequality. Many people in the civil rights movement, particularly younger activists sympathetic to SNCC, grew increasingly impatient with the pace of change in the country and were frustrated with both the federal government and the older, more established civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and SCLC. This new generation of activists called for "Black Power," not integration, and new organizations such as the Black Panther Party, founded in October 1966, became known for their armed confrontations with police and their critiques of capitalism. The shift to more militant tactics and rhetoric, combined with a series of race riots that swept the nation in the years following the March on Washington, helped shift national opinion of the civil rights movement from sympathy to distrust.⁵

King had not necessarily been out of step with the ongoing shifts in the movement. He had focused increasingly on economic inequality and linked the cause of economic justice with ending the growing war in Vietnam, setting the stage for the Poor People's Campaign and also alienating him from many former allies. In the face of increasing militancy in local communities and national organizations, he and SCLC remained committed to nonviolence and intended for the Poor People's

Campaign to restore the credibility of nonviolent action. However, they recognized that the crises of the late 1960s demanded a different kind of campaign. "Our cities are literally burning down, our people are literally dying of hunger and joblessness and mental disorder," said SCLC's Reverend Andrew Young early in the planning process. "And it may be necessary for us to run through certain little 'traffic laws' to dramatize the fact that there is an emergency."⁶

An affable, even-tempered Howard University graduate who would later become mayor of Atlanta and U.S. representative from Georgia, the 26-year-old Young spoke forcefully about occupying the District. "We decided that the poor, the ones who are now catching the hell, had to be involved in a movement which we were sponsoring," Young explained in March 1968, "and we decided that we would bring some of those who suffered to the nation's capital where they could be very visible."⁷ He demonstrated little concern for whatever imposition this might create for Washington residents. If SCLC assembled a few hundred marchers on the heavily traveled bridges that connected the capital to its suburbs, Young reasoned that they could create a high-profile rush-hour nightmare. If they wanted to create an



Less than a year after the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King attended President Johnson's signing of the Civil Rights Act. Also in the crowd were National Urban League Director Whitney Young (behind King) and Reverend Walter Fauntroy, head of the SCLC's Washington chapter (three men to the left of King). *Photograph by Cecil Stoughton, courtesy, Lyndon B. Johnson Library*



U.S. Army soldiers guard the still-smoldering destruction at Seventh and N Streets, NW, during the April disturbances following King's assassination. Though the city was still reeling from the riots, organizers of the Poor People's Campaign pressed on with their plans to bring thousands of protesters to the city. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

even greater disruption in the capital, Young suggested that they could target the city's institutions: "A thousand people in need of health and medical attention sitting in around the Bethesda Naval Hospital, so that nobody could get in or out until they get treated . . . would dramatize the fact that there were thousands of people in our nation in need of medical services."⁸ By plotting a campaign in Washington that focused solely on influencing a national audience, Young and SCLC displayed a striking indifference to local conditions. They also overlooked an important opportunity to draw attention to the struggles of the District's disfranchised residents.

The campaign's unique and unpredictable format made members of President Johnson's cabinet, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Justice nervous. The organizers had applied to the National Park Service for permits for 1,500 marchers to camp on the National Mall, but with less than two months before the campaign's launch, Assistant Attorney General Fred Vinson advised Park Service officials to reject the application on the grounds of impracticality.⁹ Vinson was reacting to reports that a number of large groups—up to 7,000 additional protesters—were headed to Washington to "promote discord."¹⁰

Rumors abounded: black activists in Alabama were planning to take over the Poor People's Campaign and foment unrest when they arrived in the District. Local leaders down South were conspiring with noted militant and D.C. resident Stokely Carmichael. Southern youth were carrying weapons in order to loot Washington stores. The FBI found the rumors baseless, and the reality quite different. For example, rather than supporting Carmichael's alleged agenda, one of his suspected allies, Reverend Charles Boone, had refused to allow Carmichael to speak at his Montgomery, Alabama, church as the campaign neared. Nonetheless, such stories stoked officials' fears of potential violence.¹¹

The Justice Department and FBI tracked rumors in part because this time, unlike 1963, SCLC did not communicate its plans to authorities. Its reticence spoke not only to SCLC's disorganization but also to its best weapon: its ability to be flexible, nimble, and creative.¹² As late as April 25, less than three weeks before Ralph Abernathy would drive the first stake into Resurrection City, SCLC leaders had managed to keep the size of the campaign, the location of Resurrection City, and the date of its planned mass demonstration concealed.¹³ "So far as we know they have no real plans," White House aide Matthew Nimetz admitted in an internal

memo, “it is thus hard for us to have a definite plan for dealing with them.”¹⁴ In fact, all White House officials knew for sure was that “in the middle of May, 3,000 or more poor people plan to arrive in the city from various parts of the country.”¹⁵

Lacking firm information and fearing disorder, jittery federal officials cooperated closely with the Metropolitan Police Department to prepare for SCLC’s upcoming protest. The April riots had prompted the Justice Department to initiate an intelligence system for the District that would yield better information about the activities of the city’s own militant groups as well as those heading to Washington for the Poor People’s Campaign. In the month between the riots and the campaign, Attorney General Ramsey Clark worked to improve coordination among District, Maryland, and Virginia officials on curfews, traffic control, and the sale of guns, gas, and liquor. Meanwhile, Under Secretary of the Army David McGiffert refined plans to facilitate troop deployment into the District. “Special duty officers” of the Justice Department were ready to familiarize themselves with both the campaign and the city and, borrowing a page from the National Guard’s April response, fan out throughout the District, not only in “dangerous” areas, to watch for problems.¹⁶

Despite officials’ fears, Attorney General Clark overruled Fred Vinson—as well as Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall—and recommended that the National Park Service issue SCLC a permit to stage its campaign and encampment along the National Mall. Clark’s reversal was inspired by King’s death, as well as Reverend Walter Fauntroy’s persuasive case that the Mall was the safest place for such a demonstration because it was isolated from homes, businesses, and other areas of dense population. Fauntroy, the leader of Washington’s local SCLC chapter and vice chairman of the appointed D.C. City Council, had used his political connections to lobby the Departments of Justice and Interior on the issue since before King’s assassination. King’s death and the subsequent riots persuaded Department of Justice officials that Fauntroy’s logic was sound. Thus Clark instructed the Park Service to reject alternative locations for campers such as Southeast D.C.’s less centrally located Anacostia Park or other areas “near the ghetto and less accessible to law enforcement.”¹⁷ On May 10, in response to Clark’s orders, the Park Service approved a permit for 15 acres alongside the Reflecting Pool and at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial, just next to the National Mall. Within federal parkland and in plain

view of tourists and commuters, it was an ideal site for a national campaign.¹⁸

The Park Service permit held SCLC accountable for basic municipal functions, prohibited firearms, required organizers to remove garbage properly, and demanded that sanitary conditions be maintained. It also gave SCLC’s leaders unprecedented powers. The Park Police, which had jurisdiction in all federal parkland, agreed not to enter the camp unless invited. Instead, SCLC implemented one of its most radical ideas: the recruitment of young men to serve as marshals and maintain order in Resurrection City. Under the supervision of James Orange, a large, bearded man with a penchant for wearing bib overalls, street gang members from several cities—including men such as 29-year-old Sweet Willie Wine, a member of the Invaders gang from Memphis, Tennessee—served industriously, at least at the start, as the camp’s internal police force. “These gang members have always lived outside the system,” Orange told a *Washington Post* reporter at the time. “Our idea was to bring them into the system, let them have a role in the functioning of Resurrection City.”¹⁹

The permit was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it was critical for SCLC to be able to control law and order in the camp at a time when the black community’s distrust of the police had reached a crescendo. On the other hand, however, the six-page permit included dozens of conditions that would grow increasingly difficult for



Sweet Willie Wine, a Memphis gang member and Resurrection City marshal, failed to persuade Ballou High School to let him address students on poverty issues. Courtesy, the *Washington Post*



Members of the Black United Front, February 1968. Front row, from left: Reverend Channing Phillips, Calvin Rolark, Stokely Carmichael, Louise Barrow. Back row: Reverend David Eaton, Marion Barry, Kenneth Kennedy, and C. Sumner Stone, Jr. The Front strongly criticized organizers of the Poor People's Campaign for ignoring local needs. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

the group to meet. The SCLC leadership wanted to provide national visibility for Resurrection City, but its very location would sow the seeds of the campaign's failure.

The April 4th assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had the unintended effect of spurring diverse local groups to join the Poor People's Campaign. Until King's death, few local African Americans were involved in the campaign. Indeed at a packed mid-February planning session, white SCLC organizer Kay Shannon spotted only two black attendees.²⁰ This lack of enthusiasm was, in part, because Washington had long been home to a large community of middle-class African Americans, many of whom did not relate to the experiences of poorer black Washingtonians. For some of those black volunteers who did turn out, black campaign administrator James Peterson charged that appearances mattered most. They "always wanted their name to be on the program," he said.²¹

The fear of unrest and retaliation were also barriers to local black participation. As police-community relations deteriorated during the mid-to-late 1960s, many black Washingtonians called for a massive overhaul of the city's criminal justice system. The Black United Front, an umbrella group of the District's black leaders and organizations that

bridged the divide between civil rights and Black Power philosophies, had been focused on police brutality, incarceration rates, and racially motivated crime policies since its founding in January 1968. Its more militant members dismissed ideas of integration and demanded neighborhood control of the police and the termination of the department's white police chief in the majority-black city. Relations were so tense that in March, local activist and Front member Julius Hobson predicted that "trigger happy" police would "slaughter" demonstrators during the Poor People's Campaign.²²

The lack of support from black Washingtonians for the Poor People's Campaign also spoke to an idea that SNCC activist-turned-local-organizer Marion Barry had articulated when he arrived in Washington in 1966. Local residents did not engage in sit-ins, boycotts, or other direct action, Barry wrote, because they "are not accustomed to doing things for themselves."²³ While Barry's observations overlooked local Washington's rich history of civil rights activism, his observations resonated with other activists. "Nobody has moved Washington," Julius Hobson claimed in 1967. "You could take a little black girl, dress her in organdy, take her downtown, pour gas over her, and it wouldn't move the community." Similarly, Gaston Neal, the director of the New School of Afro-American Thought, suggested, "Everybody's ready for the riot here but the black man who's supposed to start it."²⁴

Finally, many black Washingtonians stayed on the sidelines prior to King's assassination because white liberals had dominated the early local planning. White activist William Moyer, a Philadelphia who headed SCLC's local operations, admitted as much. Moyer believed that the District perfectly embodied the nation's poverty problems. Yet despite holding committee meetings at 14th and U Streets, NW—then the heart of black Washington—he and other white volunteers had trouble recruiting African Americans. "It was basically a white group that met which was supposed to be doing this thing for poor, black people," Moyer observed. "This upset a lot of people."²⁵ SCLC did not even reach out to the United Planning Organization (UPO), the District's de facto anti-poverty organization, in planning the Poor People's Campaign.²⁶

King's death changed everything. Now, in the spirit of cooperation, even militant black organizations were willing to join what had taken on the mantle of King's final action. Black Power icon



A month before the protesters arrived, local architect John Wiebenson, who donated his design services to Resurrection City, helped assemble a test plywood shelter. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

Stokely Carmichael originally had not endorsed the campaign, but King's assassination caused him to reconsider. The lanky, charismatic Howard University graduate and former SNCC chairman had made Washington his home base in December 1967 and helped establish the Black United Front.²⁷ Like other militants, Carmichael believed that SCLC was ineffective, but he was willing to give the Poor People's Campaign a chance. At a SNCC-sponsored press conference the day after King's death, Carmichael mourned the slain hero and pledged his support to SCLC, prompting many of his allies around the country to follow suit.²⁸ Members of the Black Panther Party reversed their opposition and would travel to D.C. in caravans from the West Coast. Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council, a radical proponent of open housing initiatives, voted to participate. Meanwhile, in California, the Los Angeles Black Congress, a Black United Front-type umbrella group for the city, endorsed the campaign and would send volunteers.²⁹

Local militant groups were supportive but aloof. SNCC's Washington chapter joined the campaign,

but Director Lester McKinnie offered only a tepid endorsement.³⁰ "There was a real reluctance among the black militant groups to become too involved," acknowledged Tony Henry, deputy coordinator for the Poor People's Campaign. "They were skeptical about its ability to achieve any meaningful results and also skeptical of the massive involvement of white people."³¹ The Black United Front, in particular, grew disenchanted. In February 1968, Front leaders had initiated meetings with SCLC to discuss how the campaign would directly benefit poor Washingtonians. When SCLC proved unwilling to take their inquiries seriously, the Front condemned the organization in a sprawling manifesto: "SCLC failed to honor the commitment made by our late and beloved brother, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., to involve the D.C. black community in its planning and to keep D.C. black people abreast of its plans."³² Not all Front members supported the official position, however; Walter Fauntroy called the manifesto "unfortunate." Some Front members chose to get involved in the campaign, but



Some demonstrators applied provocative slogans to their shelters. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

they did so as Washington residents and not as representatives of their organizations.³³

Wealthy black Washingtonians also remained ambivalent. Writing checks to help the Poor People's Campaign was easy, and many did so; more personal involvement was difficult. The campaign needed housing, food, and transportation—logistical assistance that the city's black elites were not accustomed to giving. When one black woman suggested that her social club make sandwiches to hand out when the caravans arrived, she was told, "If they can bring thousands of poor here, they ought to know where to feed them."³⁴

For many Howard University students, however, the Poor People's Campaign presented a unique opportunity to play an important role in the next phase of the civil rights movement. Living in the District, at the intersection of local and national politics, Howard students had long been involved in civil rights efforts. Clyde Aveilhe, a student and director of the university's student activities, boasted in 1968 that "anywhere from 65 to 80 percent of the most 'militant' students on our campus have working involvements with off-campus organizations and individuals who are in the revolution."³⁵ Freshman Michael Harris was among them. Imploring the university to "come off the Hill," and help erase the divisions between "so-called intellectuals and the people, college students and block boys," Harris joined a number of Howard students who made the short trip from

campus to the National Mall to participate in the Poor People's Campaign.³⁶ The students found different ways to get involved. The school's Delta Sigma Theta sorority, for example, serenaded Resurrection City residents every Friday afternoon. Other students offered workshops on various topics through the encampment's Poor People's University.³⁷

Harris's involvement did not reflect his support for SCLC *per se*. Like many younger activists, he preferred SNCC's militant rhetoric, local organizing tactics, and black solidarity over SCLC's more traditional style. But he came out of a sense of duty to, and solidarity with, the larger movement. "The great thing about the Poor People's Campaign," he told an interviewer, "was the fact that, in my opinion, the two groups in the black community that could cause and sustain revolution were the black college students and the black gangs. The white man tries to divide us, but we liberated ourselves from that." What he appreciated most was how Howard students were accepted in Resurrection City.³⁸ Accepted, perhaps, but as Clyde Aveilhe observed frustratingly, "Some people there didn't take [us] seriously" and viewed them as interlopers.³⁹ Yet gang members and college students comingled during the Poor People's Campaign in ways that would have been significantly less acceptable just five years earlier.

King's death also galvanized some local black Washington women into becoming the campaign's unofficial champions. "We are trying to organize the mass of Washington's black middle-class community and get them integrated into the Poor People's Campaign," June Fowler told *the Washington Post*. Fowler, the wife of an attorney and mother of two teenage sons, gathered seven other women in her home to strategize how to support SCLC's upcoming campaign. "People are always criticizing Washington's Negro society for not doing enough," she said. "But what has been done has largely been done individually or in small groups, and those involved haven't had what they've accomplished publicized." This time, the women sought to draw attention to their efforts. "Move over Lady Bountiful," Fowler exclaimed, "soul sister is here!"⁴⁰

Although only a small group had assembled at Fowler's house, the 40 clubs and organizations to which the women belonged represented thousands of potential middle-class African American volunteers. The friends had a variety of reasons for participating. A sense of justice compelled Mrs. Alvin Robinson, president of Girl Friends, a social

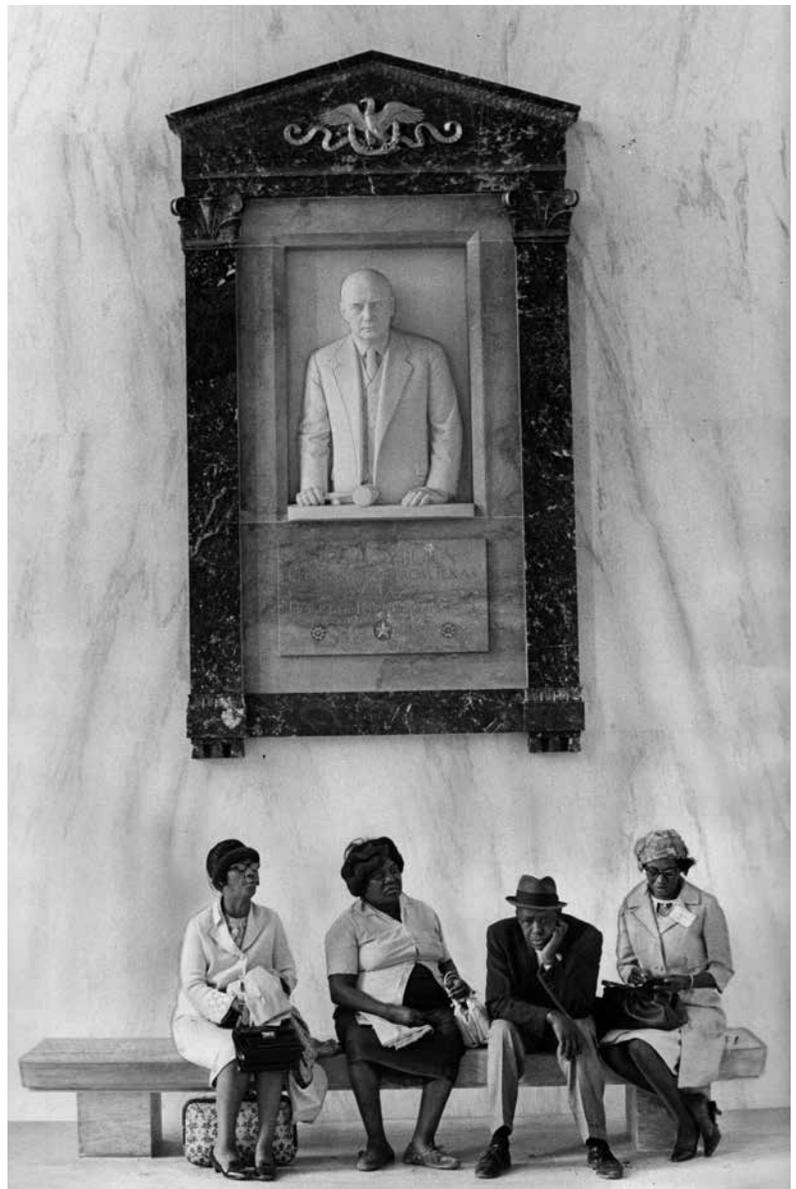
organization best known for its sponsorship of cotillions. “If a small group of half-senile, bigoted old men on Capitol Hill think they can get out of making changes by claiming they are sought only by a small minority within a minority, we’re here to tell them they’re wrong.” Meanwhile, Mrs. Waddell Thomas explained, “I am a grandmother and too old to be a militant. But I’m not too old to be good old-fashioned angry.” Mrs. Claude Cowan, who recruited volunteers on the neighborhood level, best summarized their dedication to the cause. “My daughter is getting married next month and two of my children are graduating from college, but preparation for that will have to wait,” she said. “The Campaign is more important.”⁴¹

Despite their best intentions, some of the District’s middle-class black women had a difficult time relating to residents of Resurrection City. In May the National Council of Negro Women opened a rare dialogue between the two groups at a poverty workshop it organized. *The Washington Post* described the result as “a confrontation both painful and illuminating.” While participants generally agreed on the problems they faced—including welfare, lack of consumer protection, access to child care, and unemployment—they differed on how to solve them. The D.C. women believed in working within the system, while the female demonstrators accused the government and the middle class of “turning their backs on the poor.” In fact, one protester directly challenged the black middle-class women in the room, including Mayor Walter Washington’s wife Dr. Bennetta Washington. “Some of the Negro people here are in places where they can change things for the poor,” she pointedly noted. “It’s time they stopped sitting on their furs and realize we’re all black sisters.”⁴²

On May 13, Ralph Abernathy, sporting a Levi’s jacket and carpenter’s apron, drove the first stake into Resurrection City. Within two weeks, a city of A-frame huts made of plywood and canvas filled the six city blocks along Constitution Avenue, NW, between the white marble of the Lincoln Memorial and the National Mall. Nine caravans, including ones from the Deep South, Midwest, and Appalachia, delivered more than 2,000 demonstrators to the capital. They quickly adjusted to life in Resurrection City. Residents created streets out of the grassy space between tents and gave them names like Love Lane and Abernathy Avenue. They also took good care of their own homes and used the 300 gallons of paint donated to the cam-

paign to personalize their tents. Some honored their hometowns by naming their huts “Cleveland’s Rat Patrol,” “Motown,” and “Beale Street Baptists,” among others. The makeshift streets were lined with larger wood structures for the city’s governing council, health and dental clinic, cafeteria, freedom school, and cultural exchange center. Inside the camp, barbers, marshals, doctors, and teachers all kept busy. Meanwhile demonstrators participated in daily protests at the Capitol and the Departments of Labor, Interior, Education and Agriculture, learning advocacy

A weary Poor People’s Campaign quartet waits to lobby their representatives at the Rayburn House Office Building. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*





D.C. Police officers, a constant presence for Poor People's Campaign members once they left their Resurrection City base, lined Independence Avenue during a June 3 demonstration at the Justice Department. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

techniques and how to confront their political representatives.⁴³

When SCLC officials and Poor People's Campaign demonstrators arrived in Washington, they found a city still reeling from the King assassination, as well as a local government and police department already stretched thin. Walter Washington, the District's first black mayor who had been appointed by President Johnson less than a year before, was not enthusiastic about SCLC's arrival. Fearful that a disorganized campaign could bring further disorder, he and city officials quietly began aiding the campaign in early May, making plans to feed demonstrators, provide emergency housing, health services, blankets, and raincoats.⁴⁴

On the national level, fundraising had become easier for SCLC following King's death. But four days after Abernethy drove the first stake into Resurrection City, SCLC had only built shelters for 700 residents; 800 additional participants were temporarily forced to stay elsewhere, with another 1,500 scheduled to arrive within days. In light of this critical housing shortage, SCLC leaders held an impromptu press conference announcing the need for more than \$3 million in additional funds. Nervously watching the news unfold from his District office, Mayor Washington brought together

all city department heads to expedite aid and speed the construction of the encampment.⁴⁵

SCLC confronted other strains as well. While the early days of Resurrection City were peaceful, accounts of violence within and outside of the camp soon emerged. Reports of rapes, muggings, and theft heightened the perception among D.C. officials that SCLC leadership was losing control of its campaign. Meanwhile, local hospitals carried the burden of treating out-of-towners, from those with mild complaints to others such as South Carolina resident James Walter, who was shot in the leg in the encampment. Food provisions also proved a strain as demonstrators turned for help to local private organizations, church and synagogue groups, and the D.C. Health and Welfare Council. An ad hoc committee led by Joseph Danzansky, president of Giant Foods, Inc., had agreed to contribute meals for Resurrection City since mid-May. By the end of the campaign, Danzansky estimated that the group had provided 185,000 meals, using roughly \$75,000 in manpower and supplies from local grocery store chains and the Washington Hotel Association.⁴⁶

The heaviest strain on participants and planners was one for which they could not reasonably have prepared: exceedingly wet weather. For more than half of Resurrection City's lifespan, it poured, including two inches of rain in a 24-hour period in mid-June. "The site is literally a sea of mud, which is about five inches deep and about the consistency of a thick milk shake," wrote National Park Service Director Nash Castro, who visited Resurrection City at the end of May.⁴⁷ The mud, combined with massive puddles of water pooling across the Mall, slowed the demonstrators' momentum and hurt morale. It also hindered volunteers' ability to provide meals and basic sewage functions. Camp doctors worried that the contaminated water and limited shelter posed serious health risks.⁴⁸ The media focused on these visible problems in unsympathetic articles with headlines such as "For the 'Poor March': Detours," "Turmoil in Shantytown," and "Poverty: Courting Trouble." Ultimately the press emphasized the unraveling of the campaign and disorder of the camp rather than the problem of poverty that drew so many to Resurrection City in the first place.⁴⁹

In spite of conditions at Resurrection City, the government's disapproval of the campaign's day-to-day activities, and the media's largely negative coverage, SCLC leaders continued to organize the campaign's capstone event, Solidarity Day—a rally



Rain in May and June created a sea of mud that dampened spirits and created logistical difficulties for Resurrection City residents. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

at the Lincoln Memorial set for June 19. In late May, longtime King associate Bayard Rustin, initially a critic of the Poor People's Campaign, volunteered to replicate the organizing work he did for the 1963 March on Washington, and SCLC readily accepted his offer. The media praised Rustin's credentials, and government officials breathed a sigh of relief knowing that the pacifist had taken charge. However, Rustin quickly alienated SCLC leadership by releasing to the press a list of specific demands titled "Call to Americans of Goodwill," which Rustin believed contained more immediate and realistic demands than Ralph Abernathy's vague organizing statement. Outraged that Rustin acted without consulting SCLC leadership, Abernathy and other SCLC officials forced Rustin to resign after serving only two weeks. With Rustin's swift resignation, many people—including the stunned press—turned against the campaign. "In rejecting Mr. Rustin and his program, the divided Southern Christian Leadership Conference has thrown away its best chance to rally broad national backing for a worthy but faltering crusade," the *New York Times* scolded.⁵⁰

Following Rustin's departure, SCLC assigned D.C. Urban League Director Sterling Tucker to



Reverend Ralph Abernathy at the podium, his arm around D.C. Urban League's Sterling Tucker, ends his Solidarity Day speech at the Lincoln Memorial by leading a Black Power salute. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*



D.C. Police officers knocked down the fence bordering Resurrection City as they prepared to clear the encampment on June 24. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

finalize plans for Solidarity Day. Tucker was an inspired choice. Born in Akron, Ohio, in 1923, he ran the Canton Urban League before relocating in 1956 to head the D.C. Urban League. The lean and bespectacled Tucker was so effective that in 1966 New York Mayor John Lindsay tried to recruit him to direct New York's anti-poverty efforts. Tucker had declined, saying he did not consider his job in Washington complete. *The Washington Post* hailed Tucker as a "veteran organizer, noted for his broad access to both the white 'establishment' and the world of the black 'militant.'" During the April riots, the paper noted approvingly that he had "equal access to police headquarters and the SNCC office on U Street, N.W."⁵¹ SCLC's decision to tap Tucker reflected a more perceptive understanding of the way that local conditions helped shape national campaigns. By harnessing Tucker's knowledge of the District, as well as his wide range of local and federal contacts, SCLC steered Solidarity Day back on track.⁵²

Tucker executed a flawless event. On June 19, 50,000 protesters, including residents from the Washington area, demonstrators living in Resurrection City or housed locally, and others who traveled in bus or car caravans, marched from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, where

Ralph Abernathy gave a stirring speech. "We have shown this government that the poor are there, that the poor can make themselves heard, that the poor are silent no more," he proclaimed.⁵³ SCLC organizers rejoiced over the demonstration's results: the marchers, 10,000 more than campaign leaders had predicted, represented all ages, races, and classes, and they had remained orderly and peaceful throughout the day.⁵⁴

The good feeling was short lived, however. The very next day violence broke out as a lone Park Police officer scuffled with 300 demonstrators returning to camp after a day of protest at the Department of Agriculture. The officer immediately called for backup, and 150 officers from Park and Metropolitan Police units arrived on the scene. The situation quickly escalated as demonstrators hurled bottles, rocks, and baton sticks at the policemen, who responded by throwing 15 tear gas canisters into the crowd and several more over the fence into Resurrection City. Police retreated after campaign marshals shepherded the demonstrators back into Resurrection City. Three days later the tenuous peace was shattered when a few youths—reported to be from Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council—threw rocks at Park Police officers stationed outside the camp. The officers again fired several rounds of tear gas into the encampment. Thick clouds of gas rolled through the campgrounds, and hundreds of residents ran out of their tents, choking, vomiting, and screaming. Though peace was soon restored, the damage had been done.⁵⁵

SCLC and Justice Department leaders disagreed over whether the police response was warranted. The gassing was "worse than anything I ever saw in Mississippi or Alabama," Andrew Young fumed. "You don't shoot tear gas into an entire city because two or three hoodlums are throwing rocks."⁵⁶ Resurrection City's leaders were left shaken. Yet internal Justice Department memos indicate that officials were satisfied with how local police officers had controlled skirmishes and charged that SCLC's failure to impose proper sanctions for the June 20 uprising had created a general lack of discipline within the camp. Based on those intelligence reports, National Park Service officials denied SCLC a permit extension and told the organization to be out of Resurrection City first thing on Monday, June 24.⁵⁷

National politicians across the political spectrum, from Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Eugene McCarthy (Minnesota) to Republican Governor Ronald Reagan (California), spoke in

favor of the decision to close Resurrection City. Even Mayor Washington called for closing the encampment, which he regarded as counterproductive and, “quite simply, menacing.”⁵⁸ D.C. Corporation Counsel Charles Duncan, a black official who sympathized with the campaign, agreed. “The situation had gotten quite out of hand in terms of who the residents were,” Duncan recalled the following December. “It was obvious that leadership . . . had failed.” Duncan lamented the fact that the camp’s day-to-day problems overshadowed “a very beautiful opportunity for concrete achievement and symbolism which the city represented.”⁵⁹

Some District white organizations, such as the Kalorama Citizens Association, expressed vindication for having opposed Resurrection City from the beginning. The group had vehemently disagreed with the National Park Service’s decision to grant camp residents a permit with such unprecedented freedoms, and it could not believe that the Park Police and Metropolitan Police Department had essentially agreed to refrain from enforcing the law. In their stead, the group hyperbolically charged, self-appointed rangers ruled in “a reign of lawlessness such as has been without parallel in our history” with “rapes, beatings, burglaries, and other crimes” taking place “every hour of the day.”⁶⁰

The Park Police estimated that about 100 assaults and other violent incidents had occurred inside the camp since its mid-May opening and reported that at least 20 visitors had been robbed, beaten, or stabbed by residents outside the encampment. Campaign officials acknowledged that media reports about camp violence were largely true, but they objected to the exaggerated frequency of the reports, the omission of details about police provocation, and the almost singular focus on violence and turmoil in the camp. When *Washington Post* reporters interviewed Alvin Jackson, a local TV repairman and self-proclaimed chief security marshal at Resurrection City, he requested that they not just report the bad news. “Put in all the good, too,” he urged. Nevertheless, Jackson acknowledged disappointment with the changing tenor of the camp: “Men are getting tired of coming home from a day’s picketing to find their belongings stolen or their wives raped,” he said. Jackson, who had given up two weeks of vacation and all of his nights off, as well as a week’s leave of absence, to help, complained that SCLC leadership “just won’t allow any kind of discipline in the camp.”⁶¹

For many Resurrection City residents, June 19’s Solidarity Day was the Poor People’s Campaign’s

natural endpoint. The majority left town after the day’s events, leaving about 500-600 people in the camp, according to Department of Justice estimates. Roughly half of those remaining left by bus and car following the violent events of June 20 and 23 and the announcement of Resurrection City’s closure.⁶² Despite Ralph Abernathy’s promise that they would stay indefinitely, SCLC leaders admitted that they, too, were ready for the campaign to end. The campaign “has become a noose around our neck,” one SCLC official told a reporter.⁶³ Hosea Williams, King’s chief field lieutenant, had been hesitant to go forward with the campaign after King died; he exhaled a little more deeply when the government ordered them “out of that mud hole.”⁶⁴ Even Poor People’s Campaign architect Andrew Young noted that “whoever cleared us out may have done us a favor.”⁶⁵ However, Abernathy did not leave without one last protest; while he agreed to allow police to close down Resurrection City, he arranged for the remaining residents to march to Capitol Hill to protest against Congress and invite arrest.

The task of clearing out Resurrection City fell to the Park Police, which had jurisdiction over the area but had only a tenth of the manpower of the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department. Roger Wilkins, head of the Justice Department’s Community Relations Service Division, anticipated problems with this arrangement. Reflecting on the situation in his 1982 memoir, Wilkins wrote, Park Police officers “just didn’t like niggers” and, at the time, he had suspected they would be itching for revenge.⁶⁶ So he deftly arranged for the District’s local police to be standing ready and waiting at Resurrection City’s gates on the morning SCLC’s permit expired. Dressed in military flak jackets and riot helmets, and armed with riot sticks, tear gas canisters, launchers, revolvers, and shotguns, the 1,000 policemen easily arrested the remaining 123 tent city inhabitants, whom they had found inside the camp singing freedom songs. The rest of the camp’s residents had followed Abernathy to the Capitol, where police arrested 235 compliant demonstrators on charges of unlawful assembly.⁶⁷

Following the mass arrests they made at both Resurrection City and the Capitol that morning, local police officers collided once more with national demonstrators in the afternoon; those whom they had not immediately arrested had migrated to 14th and U Streets, NW, the epicenter of April’s riots. When demonstrators began breaking windows and hurling rocks at the police, offi-

cers blanketed the area with tear gas. Mayor Washington quickly declared a state of emergency and ordered a citywide curfew. Between the morning of June 24 and the morning of June 26, officers arrested another 286 people around 14th and U Streets and elsewhere in the city—roughly half for curfew violations. “It became very much a D.C. problem again,” city attorney Charles Duncan said.⁶⁸

Before the mud had hardened on the National Mall, SCLC organizers began to evaluate the Poor People’s Campaign. They generally deemed the effort a success. Not only did it help dramatize the plight of impoverished citizens across the country, it also proved that the organization could carry on without Martin Luther King. Beyond quantifiably measurable successes—3,000 Resurrection City residents, 50,000 attendees at Solidarity Day, extensive news coverage—it broke ground in uniting the poor across demographic divides. “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,” SCLC leader and future Democratic presidential nominee Jesse Jackson said. “This vast task of acculturation, of pulling the poor together as a way of amassing economic, political, and labor power, was the great vision of Dr. King.”⁶⁹ Similarly, for local white organizer Kay Shannon, the campaign succeeded “because it radicalized an awful lot of people.”⁷⁰



Tear gas canisters thrown by D.C. police officers exploded at 14th and Q Streets, NW, on June 24 after demonstrators broke windows and hurled rocks. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

Due in large part to King’s assassination, the campaign briefly united African Americans who might not have otherwise supported it. Despite rumors that Stokely Carmichael would disrupt the campaign, his public support ultimately encouraged other militants to join the effort. Howard students, who had been turned off by SCLC’s continued insistence on nonviolence, found their experiences down on the Mall empowering. And Washington activists such as Sterling Tucker and Walter Fauntroy asserted their power behind the scenes.

But the Poor People’s Campaign’s success came at a price. The campaign had asked a lot of Washington residents. In addition to SCLC’s request for local organizers, participants, and general hospitality, the campaign tied up the city’s resources and sidetracked the local government for much of the summer. Even though federal officials were primarily responsible for Resurrection City itself, the problems of health, sanitation, police, and to a lesser extent, transportation and fire, all fell on the District.⁷¹

On the local level, SCLC’s biggest misstep was in bypassing the city’s Black United Front, leading to anger at SCLC for exploiting the District for national gain while ignoring the collateral damage of its actions. “Honkie cops didn’t go down against SCLC. They went down against the entire black community of Washington, D.C.,” Front members charged. As had happened during the April riots, “D.C. black mothers and black children were tear-gassed for only one reason—they were black.”⁷² The Front criticized Solidarity Day as a “white-conceived exercise to divide the black community” and claimed that the city’s all-black organizations had not been invited to participate. “How could any Solidarity Day be achieved,” BUF asked, “when any segment of Black People is deliberately excluded?”⁷³

The Front refused to absolve SCLC for descending upon its city to push a civil rights agenda that overlooked Washington’s own poor people, devastated neighborhoods, and colonial rule. After the campaign, the Front warned “that no organization is going to come into this city, program a protest and then expect D.C. black people to sit back and get put in a white racist trick bag.” The group also offered an ultimatum to the national civil rights community. “Unless such organizations are prepared to join with D.C. black people in helping to build a strong and viable black community,” it cautioned, “then we



Reverend Ralph Abernathy was the first to be arrested at the U.S. Capitol on June 24. Abernathy and other SCLC leaders considered the Poor People's Campaign to be a success, but media coverage and historical accounts depicted it as a failure. *Courtesy, the Washington Post*

sternly warn against further protests which do not involve BUF.⁷⁴

In the aftermath of SCLC's anti-poverty campaign, many observers questioned the strength of the national civil rights movement. In contrast to how it lauded the 1963 March on Washington, the press painted Solidarity Day, and the Poor People's Campaign overall, as a failure. According to William Raspberry, a black columnist for *the Washington Post*, "What [Solidarity Day] taught us, perhaps, is that the day of the demonstration as an effective civil rights tool is over, that there can never be another Aug. 28, 1963."⁷⁵ Another African American *Post* reporter agreed, calling the campaign "a story about a symbol that turned into a near disaster."⁷⁶

Resurrection City was a risky endeavor, but one that reflected the necessity of flexibility and inventiveness within the civil rights movement at a time when activists were focused on firmly entrenched barriers to upward mobility, job security, and economic opportunity. At the center of SCLC's innovative campaign lay Washington, D.C., where organizers brought a multiethnic coalition to draw visibility to those who suffered from poverty. And they succeeded. "The poor couldn't be missed," wrote journalist John Neary in *Life*. "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." The poor, Neary concluded, "never intend to be invisible again."⁷⁷

But SCLC planned a campaign in the District that depended heavily on local support while simultaneously overlooking the city's own poor residents and its specific racial, economic, and political problems—especially those heightened by the April riots just one month earlier. In this respect, SCLC failed spectacularly. It lost an opportunity to emphasize the supreme irony of the District: the ultimate representation of federal power stood just blocks from where the city's black neighborhoods sat devastated from the April riots, decades of neglect, and a century of local disfranchisement. But SCLC's leaders only paid attention to local Washington when it was in their interest to do so.⁷⁸

Even so, the campaign resonated with many local black and white residents who continued to believe in its goals even as police flattened Resurrection City. They were not the only ones to remain hopeful. On June 24, as police escorted Reverend Ralph Abernathy off Capitol Hill and into a prison van, he raised his hand in a V sign, smiling to those waiting to be arrested.

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Notes

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