

BLACK, BROWN AND POOR:
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN
AND ITS LEGACIES

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1967, the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) represented a bold attempt to revitalize the black freedom struggle as a movement explicitly based on class, not race. Incorporating African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and poor whites, the PPC sought a broad coalition to travel to Washington, D.C., and pressure the government to fulfill the promise of the War on Poverty. Because of King's death and the campaign's subsequent premature end amid rain-driven, ankle-deep mud and just a few, isolated policy achievements, observers then and scholars since have dismissed the campaign as not only a colossal failure, but also the death knell of the modern freedom struggle.

Using a wide range of sources – from little-used archives and Federal Bureau of Investigation files to periodicals and oral histories – this project recovers the broader significance of the campaign. Rejecting the paradigm of success and failure and placing the PPC in the broader context of the era's other social movements, my analysis opens the door to the larger complexity of this pivotal moment of the 1960s. By highlighting the often daunting obstacles to building an alliance of the poor, particularly among blacks and ethnic Mexicans, this study prompts new questions. How *do* poor people emancipate themselves? And why do we as scholars routinely *expect* poor people to have solidarity across racial and ethnic lines? In fact, the campaign did spark a tentative but serious conversation on how to organize effectively across these barriers. But the PPC also assisted other burgeoning social movements, such as the Chicano movement, find their own voices on the national scene,

build activist networks, and deepen the sophistication of their own power analyses, especially after returning home. Not only does this project challenge the continued dominance of a black-white racial framework in historical scholarship, it also undermines the civil rights master narrative by exploring activism after 1968. In addition, it recognizes the often-competing, ethnic-driven social constructions of poverty, and situates this discussion at the intersection of the local and the national.

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Abbreviations

AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AGIF	American G.I. Forum
AGP	Albert Gollin Papers
AIM	American Indian Movement
ANMA	Asociación Nacional México Americana
AV	Appalachian Volunteers
CAP	Community action program
CCCO	Coordinating Council of Community Organizations
CFM	Chicago Freedom Movement
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CRC	Civil Rights Congress
CSO	Community Service Organization
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEPC	Fair Employment Practices Committee
FLOC	Farm Labor Organizing Committee
FTA	Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers
HREC	Papers of the Highlander Folk School
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
JOIN	Jobs Or Income Now

KOTZ	Papers of Nick and Mary Lynn Kotz
KP	Papers of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
LADO	Latin American Defense Organization
LBJ	Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library
LULAC	League of United Latin American Citizens
MAPA	Mexican American Political Association
MAYO	Mexican American Youth Organization
MSRC	Moorland-Spingarn Research Center
MSRCVF	Moorland-Spingarn Research Center Vertical File
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCAI	National Congress of American Indians
NFWA	National Farm Workers Association
NIYC	National Indian Youth Council
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
PPC	Poor People's Campaign
PPE	Poor People's Embassy
PPU	Poor People's University
RLT	Papers of Reies López Tijerina
SAIA	Survival of American Indians Association
SCEF	Southern Conference Education Fund
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference

SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
UAW	United Auto Workers
UFW	United Farm Workers
UMWA	United Mine Workers of America
USWA	United Steel Workers of America
USS	United Scholarship Service
WSO	West Side Organization

Introduction

“[W]hen you stand up for justice, you can never fail.”

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ¹

For more than two months in the spring of 1968, an interracial, multiethnic community of the poor and their allies struggled to emerge in the center of Washington, D.C. Called “my first home” by more than a few people, Resurrection City was located on the National Mall.² It housed several thousand residents and hosted thousands more as visiting dignitaries, journalists, and curiosity-seekers came to visit. Designed as a strategic launching pad for protests against federal anti-poverty policy, Resurrection City also became a community with all of the tensions that any society contains: hard work and idleness, order and turmoil, punishment and redemption. Businesses flourished inside the tent city’s walls, as did street crime. Older men informally talked politics while playing checkers or having their hair cut; others argued in more formal courses and workshops. A dysfunctional town government offered an array of services, some more reliable than others, from day care and food to security and sanitation. Soul music punctuated the air, as did pungent odors. Most importantly and uniquely, a constant cultural exchange occurred among neighbors within the shantytown and its two sister “cities,” located in a nearby school and church. African

¹ King, “Local 1199 Salute to Freedom: The Other America,” March 10, 1968, Box 14, Speeches, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Papers, Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Change, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter known as KP).

² *The Worker*, May 26, 1968.

Americans, ethnic Mexicans, poor whites, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians shared their hopes and dreams with each other in public spaces as well as behind “closed” tent flaps, from the lines for the mess tent and portable toilets to the tables inside the Many Races Soul Center.³ And it was the potential of this cooperation and exchange – between people with a shared history of oppression but divided in so many other ways – that was at the heart of the Poor People’s Campaign.

Envisioned by Martin Luther King Jr., the Poor People’s Campaign (PPC) aimed to transform the African American freedom struggle into a larger movement to liberate all oppressed people in the United States. Demonstrating an increasingly sophisticated class-based analysis, King invited not just blacks and whites but also people of Mexican descent, American Indians, and Puerto Ricans to march on Washington – making the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) the first national organization of its kind to reach beyond the traditional civil rights coalition. Together, this early rainbow coalition of Americans would dramatize the plight of poverty by bringing “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.” Once there, the poor would “demand to be heard, and we will stay until America responds,” stated King when he first unveiled the PPC in December 1967.⁴ Marchers would implore the nation to

³ Although an unusually inclusive campaign, SCLC records give little indication that King considered including either Asian Americans or Cuban Americans, perhaps because of their often misleading reputations as disproportionately middle class and, even worse, “model minorities.”

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., press conference transcript announcing Poor People’s Campaign, December 4, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>

reject spending billions on the Vietnam War and instead rededicate itself to the War on Poverty declared by the federal government years earlier, through programs for jobs and income maintenance, collective bargaining and quality education, fair housing and criminal justice reform. In the process, the campaign would restore the credibility of non-violent strategy in social justice organizing, particularly amid the urban rebellions erupting each summer and the rhetoric of “any means necessary.” In short, a grand, sustainable, and nonviolent multiethnic coalition of the poor would be born.

Tragically, an assassin’s bullet ended King’s life in Memphis on April 4, 1968, before he could lead the campaign himself. As a tribute to the slain civil rights leader, his successor, Ralph Abernathy, vowed to keep King’s vision alive and make his last crusade a reality. Despite the many physical and emotional challenges left in the wake of their friend’s death, Abernathy and his aides in SCLC launched the campaign less than a month later with unprecedented support from civil rights activists, politicians, and average citizens, many of whom embraced the campaign only after King’s violent death. Resurrection City emerged as not just a central element of the Washington campaign but its most enduring symbol.

But a symbol of what precisely? To many of its residents, it was “the city where you don’t pay taxes, where there’s no police brutality and you don’t go to jail.” In other words, it was a space where the poor were treated with respect and even care rather than cruelty and indifference. But its public reputation, driven by mass media reports, was different. It was marked by disorder, filth, and violence. As one resident articulated it, “The anger and

publications/papers/unpub/671204-003_Announcing_Poor_Peoples_campaign.htm, accessed September 9, 2005 (hereafter known as MLKPP).

problems and sickness of the poor of the whole nation were in this one shantytown.”⁵ Resurrection City dramatized poverty, as originally envisioned, but the public’s response became one of impatience, even contempt, for the town’s problems, rather than understanding and empathy. Thus, federal officials refused a park permit extension and told Abernathy that Resurrection City needed to be evacuated by the morning of June 24, 1968. Campaign officials complied with the order and, within hours, police officers in riot gear transformed the fragile community into little more than a pile of scrap wood and debris, driving the last few diehards into the early morning haze.

While watching the police clear the encampment, the Reverend Andrew Young made a confession to a journalist covering the demolition. “In one sense,” said the executive vice president of SCLC, “whoever cleared us out may have done us a favor.”⁶ After six weeks in the tent city and months of planning, the Washington phase of the campaign had drained its primary organizers of money and energy; their patience appeared to be nearing an end. For a group of folks who had never built or run a small city, as well as those watching from the sidelines, Young’s sentiment seemed right. Although several hundred people stayed in Washington to continue the campaign and SCLC extended the PPC moniker to many of its other activities during the next year, most of those observing the campaign, including journalists, government officials, and much of the civil rights leadership, declared the campaign over. Rather than boldly revitalize the freedom struggle as a movement based

⁵ Faith Berry, “The anger and problems and sickness of the poor of the whole nation were in this one shantytown,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 7, 1968, 16.

⁶ *New York Times*, June 25, 1968.

on class, Martin Luther King Jr.'s last dream lay pulverized amid the rain-driven, ankle-deep mud of Resurrection City and the fractious and polarized politics of the late 1960s.

Commentators dismissed the campaign as a colossal failure deeply damaging to the modern black freedom struggle. Ralph Abernathy's arrest was "the crowning irony of a mammoth misadventure," wrote Monroe Karmin of the *Wall Street Journal*. "The villains in the public's view have turned out to be the demonstrators themselves."⁷ Journalists writing for papers across the political spectrum echoed this sentiment, calling the PPC "a tragic episode" that "failed to reach goals," was "doomed to failure," and met its "downfall" and an "inglorious end."⁸ Even arguably more sympathetic correspondents, such as the *New York Times*' Ben Franklin, drew gloomy conclusions. "Far from bringing down upon the rich Philistines of Washington the promised scourge of justice and truth," wrote Franklin, "... Abernathy and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff had succeeded in crowning the Poor People's Campaign with bathos."⁹

Historians have parroted journalists' conclusions, employing even sharper language and grander pronouncements. Adam Fairclough, a scholar of King and SCLC, calls the campaign "a shambles. ... 'Resurrection City' became a gang-infested jungle – an eyesore and an embarrassment ... having achieved virtually nothing. The SCLC never recovered

⁷ *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 1968.

⁸ *U.S. News & World Report*, July 8, 1968; *New York Times*, June 30, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, June 25, 1968; *Jet*, July 11, 1968; and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 11, 1968.

⁹ *New York Times*, June 30, 1968.

from the fiasco.”¹⁰ Others refer to it as “an almost perfect failure” and a “disaster,” or quote Bill Rutherford, SCLC’s executive director, who called the campaign “the Little Bighorn of the civil rights movement” – an eye-catching although imprecise analogy.¹¹ Most King scholars, including prize-winning biographers Taylor Branch and David J. Garrow, offer little to no analysis of the campaign itself.¹² Those that do, have judged the campaign through the narrow lens of success versus failure and attempt to explain why the campaign came up short. Their explanations range from a disorganized SCLC leadership incapable of filling the vacuum left by King’s death and an FBI-coordinated “dirty tricks” campaign to interethnic squabbling and imprecise policy objectives.¹³ In fact, only a handful of scholars

¹⁰ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Viking, 2001), 321. “Fiasco” proves a popular label among historians, including Harvard Sitkoff and John D’Emilio. Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 222, and D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 464-465.

¹¹ Gerald McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King Jr., the FBI and the Poor People’s Campaign* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 107; Peter Ling, *Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 297; and William Rutherford in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, ed. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 480. At least in 1876, the Sioux decisively “won” the Battle at Little Bighorn before losing the eventual war against federal soldiers.

¹² By privileging King’s life, biographers Branch and Garrow discuss the planning stages for the PPC but not the campaign itself. Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 659, 661, 670-673, 679, 688-691, 707, 720-721, 754-755, 764-765; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986), 589-601, 606-609, 611-618, 622-623. See also Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007), 173-190, 500-501; Ling, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, 297-301; Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 320-321; Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 220-222, and *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2008), 223-231; and Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws that Changed America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 379-403.

¹³ Charles Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection: The Poor People’s Washington Campaign* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969); and McKnight, *The Last Crusade*. Other narrative accounts include Ben W. Gilbert and the staff of the Washington Post, *Ten Blocks from the White*

explicitly have recognized the PPC's class-based character. While Thomas Jackson hints at the campaign's complicated nature, placing its "failure" in quotes, only George Mariscal, Robert Chase, and Ernesto Vigil mention the campaign's non-black participants. And yet, all three explain *why* the campaign failed – disorganization, police suppression, and, in Chase's case, arguing that Middle America outright rejected the PPC's class analysis.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, then, there have been no grand public commemorations of the Poor People's Campaign.¹⁵ While media outlets, schools, governments, and churches recognize the anniversaries of Montgomery, the sit-in movement, the Freedom Rides, Birmingham, Selma, and, perhaps most prominently, the 1963 March on Washington, there are no anniversary celebrations of the PPC – even in its fortieth year. The campaign receives occasional mention in the press, such as a review of a left-wing dramatic tribute to King, or

House: Anatomy of the Washington Riots of 1968 (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968); and Amy Nathan Wright, "Civil Rights 'Unfinished Business': Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign," (PhD diss, University of Texas, 2007). Fager's book remains the most comprehensive narrative to date, although the author in 1969 was certain that, "No doubt the Campaign's moldy cadaver will eventually be exhumed and exhaustively dissected by a corps of PhD candidates, and its inner secrets will be exposed." Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 4.

¹⁴ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 329-359; Robert T. Chase, "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City," *Essays in History* 40 (1998); and George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun: Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 178-199. Jackson's discussion, while nuanced, retains the narrow black-white lens of almost every other historian of the modern black freedom struggle.

¹⁵ Roland L. Freeman's traveling exhibition of his photography of the campaign's Mule Train comes closest to a full commemoration. Many of his and other photographers' images have been published in a companion book to the exhibit. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* (Nashville, Tenn.: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998).

an opinion piece by a syndicated columnist.¹⁶ Most prominently, journalists made passing mention of the PPC in preparation for 2008 presidential candidate John Edwards' three-day, eight-state poverty tour starting in Marks, Mississippi, where King was to begin the campaign officially. But even the news coverage of Edwards' campaign swing concentrated its historical comparisons on the efforts of another presidential candidate, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and his own highly publicized tour of impoverished America in 1967 and 1968.¹⁷

In contrast, every January and February, schoolchildren hear King's "I Have a Dream" speech to commemorate his birthday and then Black History Month. As scholars have well established, King often has been frozen in time in the public memory, epitomized by his optimistic speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963.¹⁸ This has overshadowed the efforts of his last year in particular, in which King denounced the Vietnam War, frontally attacked the nation's economic system, and linked the two. One key reason for this, as Richard Lentz states, lies in King's symbolic importance:

¹⁶ During the summer of 2007, the Waterwell theater company presented off-Broadway "The Last Year in the Life of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as Devised by Waterwell: A Rock Operetta," a.k.a. "The/King/Operetta." *Orlando Sentinel*, July 10, 2007, and *New York Sun*, July 9, 2007. On King's observed birthday, *Kansas City Star* columnist Lewis Diuguid called for a new Poor People's Campaign. *Charlotte Observer*, January 21, 2008.

¹⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2007; *New York Times*, July 16, 2007; *Washington Post*, July 17, 2007; *Miami Herald*, July 17, 2007; (Raleigh) *News and Observer*, July 20, 2007; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 22, 2007; and *Charlotte Observer*, July 22, 2007. One exception, appropriately, was the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal*, July 17, 2007.

¹⁸ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 1-2; Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines and Martin Luther King* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 1-3, 75-78; and Edward P. Morgan, "The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 137-166. For broader discussions on the problematic way Americans remember the black freedom struggle, see the Romano and Raiford collection in its entirety.

He exerted enormous power in the culture as a symbol, embodying the essential goodness of American society and reaffirming the consensus about the great principles that ought to rule it – first by waging nonviolent war on Jim Crow, then by serving as the symbolic alternative to those who preached revolution or social change that was too rapid or too drastic, and those who stood against change of almost any sort at any pace.¹⁹

A Martin Luther King Jr. taking on the nation’s class structure clearly has proven far less palatable than the martyr focusing on basic citizenship rights. Yet, this narrowing of King also reflects the importance of *success* on the public memory. Simply put, demonstrations seen as ultimately successful forty years later garner far more attention than radical “failures.” The treatment of other so-called movement failures – the Chicago Freedom Movement, the Albany, Georgia, Movement, and the Congress of Racial Equality’s Journey of Reconciliation – all suggest how the public memory perpetuates the pattern.²⁰

But a success-failure model oversimplifies our understanding of inherently complex historical moments, especially grassroots social movements. As Robin Kelley has eloquently stated,

too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they ‘succeeded’ in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet is it precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change.²¹

¹⁹ See Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines and Martin Luther King*, 338.

²⁰ For studies that complicate these moments as more than mere failures, see James R. Ralph Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 601-707; and Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapter 1.

²¹ Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), ix.

Social movement theory suggests that there are often unintended consequences that follow the projection of a radical vision. “[T]o talk about success is problematic because it overemphasizes the intention of movement participants in producing certain changes,” comments sociologist Marco Giugni. “While it is certainly true that social movements are rational efforts aiming at social change, their consequences are often unintended and are not always related to their demands.”²² Whether it is cultural changes on the individual micro-sociological level, or the cumulative effect of a “hidden transcript,” scholars in other locales have demonstrated how historical actors and actions are not always what they seem and achieve far more than outsiders perceive.²³ For instance, taken in isolation, the small number of black voters registered by civil rights field workers in Mississippi in 1963-64 or the unfulfilled settlement of the Chicago Freedom Movement in 1966 may appear as failures, in

²² Marco Giugni, “How Social Movements Matter: Past Research, Present Problems, Future Developments,” in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xxi.

²³ Charles Tilly, “Invisible Elbow,” *Sociological Forum* 11 (1996): 589-601; Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), and *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982; 1999); and James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Such theories are reflected broadly by recent scholarship on the African American freedom struggle. For instance, see Robin Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” 80 *Journal of American History* (1993): 75-112, and *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

the eyes of those who measure success primarily through high-profile policy outcomes.²⁴

Yet when viewed in a broader sense, taking into account the individual lives transformed and the lessons learned, such movement “failures” suddenly appear to be worthy and instructive. King himself said as much, while recruiting for the campaign in February 1968, telling a group of hospital workers that “when you stand up for justice, you can never fail.”²⁵

Therefore, the most appropriate question to ask of the Poor People’s Campaign is not of failure, success, and why one or the other occurred. Such framing not only flattens the experiences of the thousands of men and women who went to Washington, it also ignores the complexity of King’s multiethnic vision itself and the inherent challenges to making that vision a reality. Rather, the question, or questions, should be about the nature of coalition-building itself. Most broadly, how *do* poor people emancipate themselves? Why do we as scholars routinely *expect* poor people to have solidarity across racial and ethnic lines, that this is somehow the norm? Moreover, in the case of the late 1960s, what is the relationship between economic justice and social justice, and how may the subtle differences between the two impede the building of lasting coalitions? If we recognize that such efforts are inherently difficult – perhaps even unnatural – then the constructive qualities and results of a troubled campaign become easier to identify and understand.

While many scholars focus on the often unfulfilled promise of interracial alliances between whites and African Americans or whites and ethnic Mexicans, fewer scholars have

²⁴ For instance, see Ralph, *Northern Protest*; and McAdam, *Freedom Summer*.

²⁵ King, “Local 1199 Salute to Freedom: The Other America,” March 10, 1968, Box 14, Speeches, KP.

been willing to explore the dynamics of interethnic organizing between blacks and people of Mexican descent, particularly in a historical context.²⁶ Those that do address interethnic organizing – or the absence thereof – tend to characterize such relationships in broad terms as good or bad, collaborative or hostile, constructive or destructive.²⁷ They also privilege

²⁶ Most scholarly discussions on interethnic organizing are by social scientists interested in the urban coalitions of the past twenty years that elected black and/or Latino mayors in Chicago, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. None provide more than a few sentences on historical antecedents. See Teresa Córdova, “Harold Washington and the Rise of Latino Electoral Politics in Chicago, 1982-1987,” in *Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. David Montejano (Austin: University of Texas, 1999), 31-57; Tatcho Mindiola Jr., Yolando Flores Niemann, and Nestor Rodriguez, *Black-Brown Relations and Stereotypes* (Austin: University of Texas, 2002); Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall and David H. Tabb, eds., *Racial Politics in American Cities*, 3rd Edition (New York: Longman, 2003); Antoinette Sedillo López, *Land Grants, Housing, and Political Power* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995); John J. Betancur and Douglas C. Gills, eds., *The Collaborative City: Opportunities and Struggles for Blacks and Latinos in U.S. Cities* (New York: Garland, 2000); James Jennings, ed., *Blacks, Latinos and Asians in Urban America: Status and Prospects for Politics and Activism* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994); Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler, eds., *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Chapters 8-14.

²⁷ On conflict, see Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, Chapters 5 and 6; Nicolás C. Vaca, *Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks and What It Means for America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); Matthew C. Whitaker, *Race Work: The Rise of Civil Rights in the Urban West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), Chapter 6; Bradford Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix: A Profile of Mexican American, Chinese American, and African American Communities, 1860-1992* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994); Peter Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); and Brian D. Behnken, “Fighting Their Own Battles: Blacks, Mexican Americans, and Civil Rights in Texas” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Davis, 2007).

On cooperation, see Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), Chapter 6; Kevin A. Leonard, “‘In the Interest of All Races’: African Americans and Interracial Cooperation in Los Angeles during and after World War II” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, ed. Lawrence de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 309-341; and Lauren Araiza, “‘For the Freedom of Other Men’: Civil Rights, Black Power and the United Farm Workers, 1965-1973” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006). See also Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); James Brooks, ed., *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), and Nicholas De Genova, ed., *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); and Henry J. Gutiérrez, “Racial Politics in Los Angeles: Black and Mexican American Challenges to Unequal Education in the 1960s,” *Southern California Quarterly* 78 (1996): 51-86.

economics within this relationship, either through a so-called natural class consciousness based upon a shared history of oppression or through a crass competition for jobs and government resources.²⁸ Yet, these analyses downplay other factors, such as ideology and culture, which have shaped greatly the extent to which African Americans and ethnic Mexicans (not to mention American Indians and Puerto Ricans) cooperated politically in the second half of the twentieth century.

During the Poor People's Campaign, ideologies of paternalism and, to a lesser extent, whiteness played important roles in perpetuating differences among blacks and people of Mexican descent – and thus produced what can only be called two ironic legacies. In this context, “paternalism” refers to a nuanced power relationship in which African Americans often saw their activist counterparts as junior partners, even children, in the business of organizing. Applied to women and non-black minorities, this top-down charismatic paternalism practiced by some members of SCLC was noticeable in the recruitment of the campaign and reflected a perception among SCLC officials that at least ethnic Mexicans had shown up late to the struggles for freedom and justice, allowing African Americans to do the “heavy lifting” of opening the eyes of white Americans. As one King

Focusing on what he calls multiple “axes of discrimination,” Mark Brilliant’s dissertation on the competing civil rights movements of post-war California is the rare study that attempts to balance interethnic cooperation and conflict. “Color Lines: Civil Rights Struggles on America’s ‘Racial Frontier,’ 1945-1975” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2002).

²⁸ In his book on recent black-Latino conflict, lawyer Nicolás Vaca suggests that, “the ostensible moral and philosophical bases for coalition politics have largely fallen apart because of competing self-interests.” *Presumed Alliance*, 188. Matthew Whitaker, in his discussion of the freedom struggle in Phoenix, describes black-Latino relations as “marred by indifference and animosity, as the two groups became ‘rivals for goodies.’” *Race Work*, 201.

aide remarked, ethnic Mexican leader Reies López Tijerina “didn’t understand that we were the parents and he was the child.”²⁹ Thus, one central irony of the campaign was that, for many ethnic Mexican participants, African Americans in positions of leadership seemed to assert a social and political hierarchy among minority groups that replicated, in a way, the very power relationship against which they fought in the larger society.

In response, ethnic Mexican activists who made the trip to Washington built their own community in the Hawthorne School, a kind of sister city about a mile away from Resurrection City. There, they lived, ate, slept, and organized together, separately from most of their black counterparts. It was in this space that activists built and deepened relationships with each other, empowering individuals, complicating their own analyses, and strengthening interregional networks in the Chicano movement. This combined with the lingering legacy of whiteness to reinforce an ethnic Mexican identity distinct from African Americans and, at times, a sense of superiority during the campaign and beyond. Although the use of whiteness as a legal tool to fight discrimination had lost considerable favor by 1968, it continued to influence Chicano movement rhetoric and identity in a subtle manner.³⁰

²⁹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 607.

³⁰ Neil Foley, “Partly Colored or Other White: Mexican Americans and Their Problem with the Color Line,” in *Beyond Black and White: Race, Ethnicity and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest*, ed. Stephanie Cole and Alison M. Parker (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 123-144, “Straddling the Color Line: The Legal Construction of Hispanic Identity in Texas,” in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 341-354, and “Becoming Hispanic: Mexican Americans and the Faustian Pact with Whiteness,” in *Reflexiones: New Directions in Mexican American Studies*, ed. Neil Foley (Austin: CMAS Books, 1997), 53-70; and Steven H. Wilson, “Brown Over ‘Other White’: Mexican-Americans’ Legal Arguments and Litigation Strategy in School Desegregation Lawsuits” *Law and History Review*, Spring 2003, http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lhr/21.1/forum_wilson.html, accessed March 3, 2004. For

Even those Chicano activists such as Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales who proudly called themselves “brown” and a part of the “cosmic race” stressed their indigenous heritage rather than their African roots, the latter of which ran the risk of being “black.”³¹ This reinforced distinction and physical separation proved to be yet another irony of the Poor People’s Campaign, in which the interethnic efforts of that spring helped set the table for the intra-ethnic cooperation that sustained the Chicano movement in the years to come.

The PPC also highlighted the often-competing, ethnic-driven social constructions of poverty. Despite a shared history of oppression, African Americans and ethnic Mexicans had overlapping but not identical solutions to poverty – the legacy of different cultural experiences dating to at least the nineteenth century. While mainstream black civil rights leaders, including King and SCLC officials, viewed jobs, quality education, and expanded access to welfare and other services as the heart of their program, many ethnic Mexicans – as well as American Indians – had a more varied prescription, including land and treaty rights. This focus did not preclude education and jobs, but emphasized that the restoration of land to its rightful owners went a long way toward solving their poverty and marginalization. Thus, while SCLC aides called for “jobs or income,” Reies Tijerina thundered condemnations of the U.S. government’s disregard for its treaties, particularly the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War in 1848. If such treaties were honored,

whiteness, see also David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), and *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994); and Gunther Peck, “White Slavery and Whiteness: A Transnational View of the Sources of Working-Class Radicalism and Racism,” *Labor* 1 (2004): 41-63.

³¹ See Martha Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

he argued, ethnic Mexicans and American Indians could use their land to achieve economic and cultural independence. Even for urban Chicano activists whose issues more closely mirrored that of their black counterparts, the symbolism of the land and the culture it embodied remained potent. But land rights were simply not on SCLC's radar – creating a steep learning curve for King and the campaign's organizers as they launched into coalition with ethnic Mexicans and American Indians.³²

The ideologies at work during the Poor People's Campaign even affect the language we use in discussing relationships between different groups. Because scholars of twentieth-century U.S. history routinely employ "interracial" to mean solely black-white – and thus perpetuate this misleading binary – I use "interethnic" instead to describe collaboration by blacks with ethnic Mexicans or between any other minority groups. I see "ethnic" more broadly than scholars such as Matthew Jacobson because it primarily derives from culture – often tied to nationalism – and thus can be used to describe not just whites, but also blacks, Indians, and people of Mexican descent. For instance, "African American" can be both a racial and ethnic descriptor, reflecting the blending of a distinct identity, culture, and dark phenotype. In contrast, "ethnic Mexican" represents a national but not necessarily racialized umbrella term for Chicanos, U.S.-born Mexican Americans, and Mexican-born immigrants. In this project, "Chicano" refers solely to those people of Mexican descent who identified

³² For instance, see Reies Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger': My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights*, trans. José Angel Gutiérrez (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000), 103; and *La Raza*, July 10, 1968. It should be noted that, historically, land was the most reliable source of political and economic power among African Americans and thus seen as the solution to poverty. But by the 1960s and the rise of agricultural mechanization, most black activists did not see land as a viable public policy solution. Disappointing "black capitalism" experiments such as Soul City, in Warren County, North Carolina, in the 1970s seemed to affirm their earlier aversion.

with the political and cultural movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although a term initially used to describe the cosmic race of Chicanos, “brown” denotes Mexican ethnicity here. I also employ “Latino” to describe Spanish-speaking peoples of different ethnicities in the United States, rather than “Hispanic,” which falsely privileges European heritage over these people’s indigenous and African roots. When referring to descendants of the continent’s first inhabitants, if at all possible I try to use an individual’s tribe; as a group, they are “American Indians,” in part to acknowledge the “mutually interanimated” histories of Indians and the United States.³³ Alas, these labels are imperfect at best and the result of inconsistent and often illogical social constructions. Therefore, rather than objective categories, readers should consider them to be approximations at best.³⁴

A deep analysis of the Poor People’s Campaign and its legacies contributes to the historiography of the civil rights movement in other ways as well. Not only does this project shine a bright light on the larger freedom struggle’s roots in poverty, jobs, and economic justice, but it also joins a burgeoning literature that stretches the civil rights narrative past the traditional endpoint of King’s death and well into the 1970s. While mainstream civil rights organizations such as SCLC were badly damaged by the turn of the decade, organizing around the freedom struggle continued unabated – part of what has been called the “long

³³ Ned Blackhawk, “Recasting the Narrative of America: The Rewards and Challenges of Teaching American Indian History,” *The Journal of American History* 93 (March 2007): 1166.

³⁴ See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Nikhil Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Steven Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race and Mexican Americans* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 10.

civil rights movement.”³⁵ The Poor People’s Campaign and subsequent related organizing, such as New Mexico’s Highlander West and Chicago’s Operation Breadbasket, just added to the list of wide-ranging activism in this period. From public housing and welfare rights organizing to the formation of Black Panther Party community survival programs and radical black labor movements, people on the ground continued to challenge discrimination in creative ways. Not coincidentally, the campaign’s objectives also dovetailed with other activists’ calls for economic justice and pointed critiques of how racial discrimination fueled poverty. And although the language of poverty and economics may have been ratcheted up in the late 1960s, organizers recognized that they had built on an earlier generation of activism that began long before Montgomery in 1955 and had been driven by jobs and economic opportunity more than anything else.³⁶ Thus, a deep contextualization of the

³⁵ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1233-1263. Although Hall coined the term, the concept existed long before as scholars challenged the so-called “master narrative,” which refers to the enduring traditional analysis of the freedom struggle that sharply curtails its scope, actors, substance, and duration. For its definition, see Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 108-109. King scholars in particular reinforce this narrative, somewhat inherently. For example, see Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), and *Better Day Coming*; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, and *At Canaan’s Edge*; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*; and Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*.

³⁶ Although some movement historians still make a case for a distinct break between the 1950s and earlier activism, most contend that the roots of the modern freedom struggle lay in the upheaval and opportunity caused by World War II. For instance, see Dittmer, *Local People*; Timothy B. Tyson, “African American Militancy and Interracial Violence in North Carolina During World War II,” in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 253-276; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 786-811.

campaign, including King's thinking, suggests that, as Jeanne Theoharis argues, "At the grassroots, economics were not divorceable from civil rights."³⁷

Much of the new generation of movement scholarship has been told from the grassroots. Yet because King, SCLC, and their co-sponsoring organizations envisioned and executed the PPC nationally with participants from across the country, an analysis of the campaign must straddle the space between the local and the national, in which both are important and relevant. Several communities play prominent roles here, in addition to Washington, D.C. Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, and, to a lesser extent, Albuquerque, all boasted sizable multiethnic populations with rich organizing traditions, and subsequently contributed equally diverse contingents to the Poor People's Campaign. In addition, each city was the home of at least one prominent leader or organization that brought the campaign prominence, and in the case of Chicago, it was in the Windy City where Martin Luther King Jr. began a recognizable path that eventually led to the PPC and Memphis. What individual participants brought home to these varied communities speaks loudly to the campaign's legacies.

* * *

For the early movement outside of the South, where the struggle for economic justice was most obvious, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside of the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

³⁷ Theoharis and Woodard, *Freedom North*, 7.

To excavate the broader meanings and experiences of this national campaign, local sources in these communities such as oral histories are paired with many national organizational records, media sources, and files from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers offered a foundation for the years and months leading up to the campaign. The records of the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia and the National Welfare Rights Organization in Washington, D.C., supplemented these materials, as the two main organizations co-sponsoring the campaign with SCLC. The recently opened archives of Reies López Tijerina, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, and their organizations in Albuquerque and Denver proved invaluable to beginning to understand the Chicano experience, in Washington and as a whole. Other manuscript collections consulted included the papers of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers in Detroit; NWRO founder and director George Wiley, the Highlander School, and writer Nick Kotz in Madison, Wisconsin; the National Indian Youth Council in Albuquerque; President Lyndon Johnson in Austin; Albert Gollin at the Schomburg Center in New York; and the NAACP and CRC on microfilm. Despite strict court-ordered rules on their use, the Chicago Police Department’s Red Squad files at the Chicago Historical Society provided a variety of clues of where to go next.³⁸

Media coverage and FBI surveillance reports, despite their biases, proved essential for content analysis and simple eyewitness accounts. In addition to looking at the elite

³⁸ A stipulation of opening up the CPD’s Red Squad files was that the material only could be cited with permission of two officers from an organization spied on by the department. The court seemed overly concerned about researchers passing along departmental presumptions of radicalism or Communism without any filter.

national press, I spent considerable time with influential black newspapers and magazines, Chicano newspapers (in English and Spanish), the American Indian periodical *Akwesasne Notes*, labor union journals, and several publications from the so-called Old and New Left, such as the *Daily Worker*. While the FBI bureaucracy and the Freedom of Information process has proven cumbersome, agency files on the campaign and several of its key participants, including King, Tijerina, and Gonzales, have contributed substantially to the analysis – often providing the only written record of countless internal conversations or meetings. Gerald “Jerry” McKnight at Hood College in Maryland deserves a special thanks for allowing me to borrow a dozen boxes of FBI files from his own project on the Poor People’s Campaign, rather than wait the three-plus years and spend countless funds to attain them through more formal channels.

Yet perhaps most valuable to excavating personal experiences has been the many oral histories I conducted and consulted. Oral histories – and memoirs, for that matter – receive criticism from some due to the imperfections of memory and the tendency to romanticize. Although clearly this poses a risk, oral histories in fact remain quite similar to any documents and sources historians routinely use. All must be interrogated and corroborated as best as possible with other sources. Oral history offers no more challenge than scholars’ legitimate attempts to read documents against the grain or for their silences. Scholars trained in oral history, including myself, ferret out responses that ring false – such as asking an interviewee the same question in different ways. To date, there are few better ways to recover the voices of people silenced by official sources. As scholars, if we are

serious about recovering such perspectives, then we must remain open to responsible innovation, including oral history.

Many oral histories touching on the campaign were conducted in the 1960s, to which I then supplemented my own. As part of the Civil Rights Documentation Project at Howard University, interviewers produced oral histories with several hundred freedom struggle activists between 1967 and 1972. Because of its location in Washington, D.C., during the campaign, researchers interviewed more than fifty march participants, most of them in 1968 or 1969. While incredibly valuable, there were only a handful of interviews with ethnic Mexican, Indian, or Puerto Rican participants. Thus, I conducted more than thirty-five oral histories of my own, ranging from forty minutes to several hours. Most were in person, but some interviews occurred by telephone after meeting the individuals.

* * *

This study is broken into six roughly chronological chapters. Chapter One provides a pre-history to the rise of the War on Poverty and the Poor People's Campaign. It focuses on the Cold War's deleterious impact on the burgeoning black-brown interethnic organizing of the 1940s and the beginning of its resurgence in the mid-1960s. Chapter Two examines the SCLC's initial development of the campaign and the ideological and logistical challenge the PPC posed to the nation as well as to the organization itself. Chapter Three explores the campaign through the eyes of its ethnic Mexican participants, many of whom returned home transformed by their experience in Washington, D.C., ready to propel the Chicano movement forward. Chapter Four presents the campaign through yet another lens, that of the "forgotten" American Indian, Puerto Rican, and poor white marchers. Although their

experiences were more muddled than their ethnic Mexican counterparts, the campaign made a difference, partly by demonstrating the many obstacles to anti-poverty coalition building. Chapter Five offers the campaign as a case study for a detailed content analysis of PPC media coverage, highlighting journalists' preoccupation with conflict and violence and their insistence on maintaining a black-white framework despite the campaign's multiethnic makeup. Chapter Six follows marchers back home to see how the campaign specifically affected their trajectories as anti-poverty and anti-racist activists into the 1970s. From Charleston, South Carolina, and Chicago to Albuquerque and Washington state, the campaign had lasting legacies on organizing, intra-ethnic and interethnic. A brief epilogue talks about the longer-term legacies of the social movements of the black freedom struggle and Chicano movement, and their impact on the interethnic coalition-building of the 1980s.

Chapter One

Prologue to the PPC: Interethnic Organizing and the Cold War

“The Mexican People in their struggles for first-class citizenship are becoming more and more aware that the only way to win this fight is to have the closest unity with our strongest ally, the Negro people.”

- Virginia Ruiz, of the Asociación Nacional México Americana, in 1952 ¹

After the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee successfully won a breakthrough contract with a recalcitrant grower in 1966, union president César Chávez received a telegram from Martin Luther King Jr. King lauded Chávez’s victory through perseverance. “Our separate struggles are really one – a struggle for freedom, for dignity and for humanity,” wrote King. “You and your valiant fellow workers have demonstrated your commitment to righting grievous wrongs forced upon exploited people. We are tighter with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized.”² It is not clear if Chávez responded. In the summer of 1968, a few months after King’s assassination, Chávez lamented the fact that he and King never had the opportunity to sit down with each other. “I never met him,” he told Eleanor Eaton of the American Friends Service Committee, “in fact, I have never met any of the top SCLC staff,” a detail which

¹ Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 222.

² King telegram to César Chávez, September 19, 1966, in Box 21, Folder 5, KP. An SCLC contingent showed their support for striking Mexican farm workers by joining the tail end of a two-month, 400-mile march from the Rio Grande Valley in Texas to Austin. King aide Andrew Young was reported to have gone to lead the black contingent at a rally to end the march. Apparently, Chávez’s and Young’s paths did not cross. *New York Times*, September 5, 1966.

Eaton found “extraordinary and tragic” given their similar strategies and objectives. To Eaton, who knew both men, “There is no one ... who best exemplifies the twin commitment to poor people and nonviolence for which Martin Luther King was fighting than Cesar (sic).”³ This fact does seem remarkable, considering popular comparisons that often portrayed Chávez as the “‘Dr. King’ of Mexican-Americans.” The parallel was rather clumsy at times, considering their dissimilar class backgrounds and personal organizing styles, yet their use of non-violent protest strategy, their strong religious faith, and their roles as heroes to the masses convinced many people.⁴ Even King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, encouraged the comparison when she urged black support for a jailed Chávez in 1970.⁵

That these two men never met speaks symbolically to the complications that activists faced in the decades after World War II when they sought interethnic alliances. While occasional coalitions emerged among black and ethnic Mexican elites around anti-racist legal

³ Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, “César Chávez,” August 23, 1968, in Community Relations Division (CRD) Folder 51910, “Economic Security and Rural Affairs 1968 – Comms and Orgs: United Farm Workers Organizing Committee,” American Friends Service Committee records, Philadelphia, Pa. (hereafter known as AFSC). Please note that AFSC uses folder numbers exclusively, not box numbers, in its archives.

⁴ Born in Arizona, Chávez had a hardscrabble childhood after his parents lost their land during the Depression and became migrant workers. His father was involved in farm labor unionization, and Chávez himself would join the National Farm Labor Union in California before becoming involved in the Community Service Organization (CSO), a group that practiced Alinsky-style grassroots organizing. Chávez would apply the principles he learned in the CSO to his later labor organizing, although by the 1980s, he faced criticism for an increasingly autocratic leadership style. In contrast, King was born into Atlanta’s black middle class, earned several college degrees, and had little to no training in such grassroots work. John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, *The Rhetorical Career of César Chávez* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1998), 11-21; Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. García, *César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 3-33, 150, 173; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 53-142; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 32-51.

⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1970; and *New York Times*, February 1, 1970.

strategies, these partnerships proved short-lived and narrow in scope. By the time King and Chávez began cutting their activist teeth through the Montgomery Improvement Association and the Community Service Organization, respectively, in the mid-1950s, the wartime tolerance for interracial alliances, rooted in a radical democratic unionism of the late 1930s and early 1940s, had been replaced by a powerful anti-communist ideology that greatly limited grassroots activists' ability to organize along class lines. While issues of economic justice never disappeared, they became overshadowed by narrower fights to desegregate public accommodations, particularly in the South, and to improve community services such as paved roads and adequate street lighting in predominantly minority neighborhoods.

Many scholars have argued that the anti-communist movement limited, if not destroyed, interracial unionism between blacks and whites and ethnic Mexicans and whites. From the lives of tobacco workers in North Carolina to those of cannery workers in California, Cold War ideology gave anti-democratic and white supremacist forces in management, government, and the increasingly conservative Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) a devastating tool to use against leftist unions. The slightest taint of communism – even one-time Communist Party ties from the Popular Front era – jeopardized the interracial promise of unions such as the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers (FTA).⁶ As a result, management and company unions regained control of

⁶ Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 787; Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) and *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women,*

many workplaces, denying activists a key space for both economic and social justice organizing. By the early 1950s, nearly all of the surviving unions disavowed their past leftist ties, interracial organizing, and a broad economic justice agenda. This re-entrenchment helped perpetuate white supremacy under the guise of anti-communist “Americanism.”⁷ Yet a constant emphasis in all of these arguments remains a racial binary, in which the “lost opportunities” of the late 1940s referred specifically to whites organizing with their minority counterparts – but not between blacks and ethnic Mexicans.

In fact the literature on black-brown organizing remains nearly non-existent on this crucial transitional period in which the black freedom struggle’s agenda in particular narrowed significantly to ward off Cold War marginalization. A handful of studies explore the impact of whiteness ideology on Mexican American legal strategy in the 1950s, using it to differentiate black and ethnic Mexican efforts and thus characterize black-brown activism more generally in the post-war period.⁸ For instance, Neil Foley suggests that ethnic

Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); García, *Mexican Americans*, Chapters 7 and 8; and Zaragosa Vargas, “In the Years of Darkness and Torment: The Early Mexican American Struggle for Civil Rights, 1945-1963,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 76 (2001): 382-413.

⁷ While all of those in footnote six recognize the enormous power of white supremacy, a few scholars such as Phil Rubio argue that white supremacy deserves the most credit for attacks on organized labor, such as in the post office. See “‘There’s Always Work at the Post Office’: African Americans Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality at the United States Post Office, 1940-1971” (Ph.D. diss, Duke University, 2006).

⁸ Foley, *The White Scourge*, “Partly Colored or Other White,” in *Beyond Black and White*, ed. Cole and Parker, 123-144, and “Straddling the Color Line,” in *Not Just Black and White*, ed. Foner and Fredrickson, 341-354; Wilson, “Brown Over ‘Other White.’” While Carlos Blanton acknowledges whiteness as one factor, he also contends that citizenship played a vital role in the strategy of George I. Sánchez and other Mexican American legal luminaries of the period. “George I. Sánchez, Ideology, and Whiteness in the Making of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, 1930-1960,” *Journal of Southern History* 72 (August 2006): 569-604.

Mexican activists in Texas entered a “Faustian pact” when they used whiteness to insist that their children belonged in white schools.⁹ Still others emphasize competing economic concerns or the impact of ethnic Mexicans’ “foreignness” to explain the lack of interracial cooperation.¹⁰ Yet while these arguments capture part of the picture, they all but ignore the role of anti-communism in complicating interethnic collaboration as a new generation of movement activists entered the scene.

This chapter aims to restore the place of Cold War ideology in the discussion of post-World War II interethnic organizing by arguing that anti-communism had a lasting and deleterious effect on such coalition-building into the 1960s. Only after the decline of the most virulent anti-communist rhetoric and tactics, and the coinciding “rediscovery” of poverty by the white liberal intelligentsia in the early 1960s, did the opportunity to organize black and brown on a larger scale emerge in any noticeable way. The red-baiting and subsequent marginalization of leftist unions once affiliated with the CIO – as well as other organizations with deep left-labor roots such as the Civil Rights Congress and the Asociación Nacional México Americana – proved central to ever-narrowing opportunities to organize together effectively. Placed on the defensive, African Americans and ethnic Mexicans worked apart more than they worked together; exceptions existed, of course, but I argue that they were just that.

⁹ Foley, “Becoming Hispanic,” in *Reflexiones*, ed. Foley, 53-70.

¹⁰ On economic competition, see Vaca, *Presumed Alliance*, and Douglas Flammig, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 360. On foreignness, see Brilliant, “Color Lines.” Despite strong ties between discourses of foreignness and anti-communism, the Cold War plays little role in Brilliant’s analysis.

On the whole, the burgeoning multiethnic vision of these organizations in the 1940s did not re-emerge in a similar national scope until the late 1960s with the efforts of not only the SCLC, but also the Black Panther Party, Reies López Tijerina's Federal Alliance of Free States, and other organizations. The Cold War then ironically played a very different kind of role – bringing disparate groups together, in part, to fight for peace amid one of anti-communism's costliest creations, the Vietnam War. By 1967, war critics including Martin Luther King Jr. believed that the war took resources away from the government's War on Poverty and helped spark the urban uprisings of the era. This connection became a central tenet of King's thinking about economic justice and eventually of the Poor People's Campaign. Understanding this pre-history from a generation before provides an essential contextualization of SCLC efforts to mobilize for the PPC – from King's evolving vision of economic justice to the vast challenges he and his organization faced in pursuing a lasting multiethnic coalition.

* * *

A generation before King's final crusade, African Americans and ethnic Mexicans began to forge their own multiethnic coalitions in the crucible of World War II. As the United States rapidly mobilized to arm and supply the Allied effort, millions of workers flocked not only to new jobs in the defense industry, but also to the unions and union-spawned organizations made possible by New Deal and Popular Front politics. In Los Angeles, for instance, the city's black and ethnic Mexican population more than doubled between 1940 and 1946. There, many workers such as Bert Corona, perhaps best known for helping found the Mexican American Political Association in 1959, received their initiation

into organizing. Starting off as a stock checker in a drug company warehouse while putting himself through college, Corona quickly became involved in union organizing at his own company and then others through the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union in 1937. Within a few years Corona had become a full-time organizer for the CIO and a member of the Mexican American Movement, a Mexican youth organization that grew out of the Young Men's Christian Association. But in 1938, he and activists in several other CIO locals committed themselves to a new organization founded by a dynamic Guatemalan organizer in CIO's United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), the predecessor to FTA.¹¹

Luisa Moreno, a journalist, poet, and organizer of black and ethnic Mexican cigar and cotton workers before joining the CIO, conceived of an advocacy organization modeled on the National Negro Congress, founded two years earlier. El Congreso de Pueblos que Hablan Español (Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples), considered the first national civil rights conference for people of Latin American descent, placed "union activity at the center of its organizing strategy." Declaring that "the Trade Union Movement provides the most

¹¹ Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 80-107. While scholars of mid-century Los Angeles acknowledge moments of interethnic cooperation, these occurrences remain marginal to their historical analyses, which inevitably focus on the separate development of community, identity, and activism in the African American and ethnic Mexican communities. My discussion throughout this chapter pieces together their passing observations with other primary source material, when possible. For instance, see George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Kevin Allen Leonard, *The Battle for Los Angeles: Racial Ideology and World War II* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*; Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

basic agency through which the Mexican and Spanish-speaking people become organized,” the organization’s platform laid out a variety of goals reaching far into the community, including: bilingual education, increased teaching of Latin American history and ethnic studies classes, censure of white supremacist textbooks, protection for the foreign born including cessation of deportation and similar programs, naturalization and ethnic Mexican participation in electoral politics, and greater consciousness regarding gender discrimination.¹² At its first convention in Los Angeles in April 1939, El Congreso also took a hard line against fascism in Europe, drawing clear parallels to racial discrimination within the United States.¹³

Although blacks were not members of El Congreso, the organization quickly became a key coalition partner with several African American groups in town, often on an ad-hoc basis. Floyd Covington, executive director of the city’s Urban League chapter since 1928, had a reputation for assailing racial discrimination of all kinds and arguing for training and employment programs for blacks, ethnic Mexicans, and Asian Americans. Covington chaired a session at El Congreso’s first convention – the only documented African American in attendance – and later spelled out what he called “tri-minority relationship,” in which the three groups could build a genuine interethnic movement to repel “the southernizing of

¹² Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican-American*, 247.

¹³ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican-American*, 244-250; Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83-84, 94-98; Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 158-202; and Corona and García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 117. For more on Moreno’s unionization efforts, see Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*.

California.”¹⁴ El Congreso also found allies in the Negro Victory Committee and the CIO Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC). In April 1942, after Los Angeles officials of the U.S. Employment Service (USES) implied that black women were best suited as domestics – and not defense workers – African Americans and ethnic Mexicans conducted a massive direct action campaign against USES and then the Los Angeles Board of Education. While the CIO ADC negotiated with agency officials, crowds marched and even took over USES’s first floor – an action that forced the agency to establish antidiscrimination committees in northern and southern California. In a separate mobilization, the Negro Victory Committee organized a mass march after the school board delayed its plans to provide black and ethnic Mexican students with more training in welding, riveting, and other defense industry production work.¹⁵

Perhaps the best known multiethnic alliance to form in World War II-era Los Angeles, however, emerged from the Sleepy Lagoon case and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1942-1943. After the robbery and murder of José Diaz, an ethnic Mexican and U.S. Army recruit, authorities found seventeen youths of Mexican descent to charge and convict using coerced confessions and discriminatory assumptions. In response, a broad progressive coalition began a two-year campaign to free the young men. The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, named after the locale where the victim was found, united El Congreso, the state CIO and several locals, a wide assortment of Hollywood personalities, and black leaders such as *California Eagle* editor Charlotta Bass and state Representative Gus Hawkins, the legislature’s

¹⁴ Leonard, *The Battle for Los Angeles*, 24-25.

¹⁵ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 198-200.

only minority member. In addition to the accused youths' freedom, the campaign demanded a larger debate about juvenile delinquency and minority youth in general – a link presented as inherent by the *Los Angeles Times* and other local papers to the point of frenzy, and eventually riot. For several days in June 1943, visiting white servicemen rampaged through ethnic Mexican neighborhoods, beating zoot suit-wearing youth and burning their clothes. Rather than be arrested, the perpetrators returned to duty, while many of their victims faced charges of disturbing the peace. White elites led by the local press heaped blame on the ethnic Mexican youth, known as *pachucos*, a once in-group term that evolved to an ethnic slur akin to “greasers,” or a stereotypical lower-class Mexican.¹⁶ “It is a mistake to sympathize with these gangsters on the theory that they are misunderstood or the victims of social yearnings,” wrote a representative columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*. “The soldiers and sailors deserve the public sympathy ... against unprovoked attacks by repulsive gangs of cowards who always outnumber their victims.”¹⁷

Prominent blacks, particularly the editors of the *California Eagle*, proved to be ethnic Mexicans' most vocal allies in challenging the media's assumptions about juvenile delinquency. Blaming the “vermin press” for fanning the flames about a “phoney (sic) crime wave,” John Kinloch wrote that African Americans had “felt the whip-lash of oppression

¹⁶ See also Eduardo Obregón Pagán, who offers an interesting discussion of the discursive constructions of “pachuco.” *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 36-38, 128-142.

¹⁷ Quote in *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1943. Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 192-198; Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, “The Sleepy Lagoon case,” Los Angeles, 1943, in Pamphlet Collection, Department of Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; and Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon*, 71-97.

and we know how and where it stings.” Blacks would have been the target “if the Mexicans weren’t more convenient,” he argued, recognizing the rich cultural exchange between black and ethnic Mexican youths. Therefore, “the fight for the rights of the Mexican citizens is part of the struggle of Negro America. It is also part of WINNING THE WAR!”¹⁸

Charlotta Bass, who was Kinloch’s aunt, *Eagle* publisher, and “an institution unto herself,” agreed with her nephew, suggesting that a larger sinister conspiracy was afoot, one bordering on treason.¹⁹ “It was simply done,” she wrote. “As simple as this: Every crime story in which a Mexican or Negro youth was involved found the word ‘zoot suit’ attached thereto.”²⁰

The editors’ insistence on alliance also probably reflected a recognition that many of their African American readers may have been inclined to accept the *pachuco* image – and all of the baggage it brought. For instance, Thomas Griffith Jr., president of the local NAACP chapter and sometime-ally of ethnic Mexican interests, found the riots far more disturbing than Sleepy Lagoon. While requesting that “the National Office urge immediate action to put an end to persecution of citizens, particularly citizens of the Mexican Race” during the summer riots, Griffith viewed the Sleepy Lagoon murder convictions quite differently.²¹ “It

¹⁸ Leonard, *The Battle for Los Angeles*, 108-109.

¹⁹ Josh Sides, “The Civil Rights Congress in Los Angeles,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 67 (May 1998): 239.

²⁰ Quote in Leonard, *The Battle for Los Angeles*, 178. See also Luis Alberto Alvarez, “The Power of the Zoot: Race, Community, and Resistance in American Youth Culture, 1940-1945” (PhD diss, University of Texas, Austin, 2001).

²¹ Thomas L. Griffith Jr. letter to Walter White, June 9, 1943, in Papers of the NAACP, Part 7, Series A, Anti-lynching Investigative files, Reel 29, frames 00021-00022 (hereafter known as NAACP).

seems,” wrote Griffith, “therefore, that the case is just one of the usual and ordinary situations where the principals involved in a gang attack have received their deserve.”²²

Walter White, national head of the NAACP, responded by calling on the Roosevelt administration, the War Department, and the state of California to conduct immediate investigations into the riots as incidents of racial discrimination. While the local NAACP remained on the sidelines for Sleepy Lagoon, during the next year it welcomed El Congreso into a coalition protesting the police killing of Lenza Smith, a black shipyard worker, as well as a state defense committee with the Urban League to free Fetus Coleman, an African American man wrongfully accused of rape in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park.²³

Thanks to their prominent positions in their communities, college-educated professionals such as Corona, Bass, Griffith, and attorney Loren Miller received considerable attention for their interethnic declarations – ones which found their way into documents preserved sixty years later. Yet, in general, it was the thousands of anonymous black and ethnic Mexican workers who gave such declarations real credibility. As ethnic Mexican workers joined the war-swelled ranks of CIO locals in several industries across southern California – not to mention cities such as Denver and Chicago – they increasingly found common cause with their black counterparts, sometimes in the face of hostility from white workers. In Los Angeles, ethnic Mexicans became a significant presence in Local 26 of the

²² Thomas L. Griffith Jr. letter to Thurgood Marshall, July 7, 1943, Part 7, Series A, Anti-lynching Investigative files, Reel 29, frames 00056-00057, NAACP.

²³ Walter White letter to President Roosevelt, June 11, 1943; White telegram to California Attorney General Robert Kenney, June 11, 1943; and press releases, June 11 and 18, 1943, Part 7, Series A, Anti-lynching Investigative files, Reel 29, frames 00013-00014, 0027, 00035 00051, NAACP; Corona, *Memories of Chicano History*, 106; and Leonard, *The Battle for Los Angeles*, 149-151.

longshoremen and warehousemen's union, in which Corona was president; Local 576 of the United Furniture Workers of America; Hod Carriers' Local 300 in the construction industry; Local 75 of UCAPAWA; and, to a lesser extent, locals of the United Electrical Workers (UE). In Colorado, ethnic Mexicans came to dominate the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union (Mine-Mill), and in Chicago, they had a considerable presence in Local 2172 of the United Steelworkers of America. In all three cities, they also proved active members of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). Through their active participation in the CIO and particularly anti-discrimination panels, ethnic Mexican workers and their leaders, such as Luísa Moreno, Armando Dávila, Refugio Martinez, and Rosendo Rivera, helped not only their own cause, but that of all minorities. At its heart, this is what the union drive was about, recalls Bert Corona: "It was an interracial and interethnic movement with lofty ideals."²⁴

Although the war had forced El Congreso from the scene by sapping its members and energy, workers continued to lead the cause at home, especially after the fighting overseas ended. In anticipation of an economic downturn and the return of millions of white servicemen into the economy, many industries eliminated jobs for black, ethnic Mexican, and women workers by the thousands. In response to this behavior and to make

²⁴ Quote in García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 132. Also Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Mexican American Labor, 1790-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 187, 191-192, 197, 199-201; Francisco A. Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, "Chicano Steel Workers and Unionism in the Midwest, 1919-1945," *Aztlán* 6 (1975): 271-272; Roger Horowitz, *Negro and White, Unite and Fight: A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 68, 73, 232; Luis Leobardo Arroyo, "Chicano Participation in Organized Labor: The CIO in Los Angeles, 1939-1950," *Aztlán* 6 (1972): 276-303; and Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 150-170, 257-258.

up lost wage levels during the war, many of the more progressive CIO unions put their multiethnic makeup on display during a wave of strikes in late 1945 and early 1946. One after the other, the United Steelworkers, United Electrical Workers, the United Packinghouse Workers, and the less diverse United Auto Workers struck their industries. On any given day during the strikes in Los Angeles, black and ethnic Mexican meatpackers formed the majority of picketers outside of the local Cudahy packing plant. “Here in our union, the Negroes and the Mexicans and the Italians get along fine,” said Ruth Brown, a young African American woman. “We worked hard together during the war when the plant didn’t have enough people. Now we’re going to stick together till we get what’s due us.”²⁵ Although CIO-organized plants had their share of hate strikes by white workers opposed to gains by blacks and their allies, Ruth Brown’s observation was echoed across the country.²⁶ Both in the rank and file, and several unions’ multiethnic national leadership, workers refused to let employers’ racially based divide-and-conquer tactics work – at least this time.²⁷ As a result, CIO unions showed genuine power on the national stage and scored major wage concessions in the process.²⁸

²⁵ *People’s World*, January 28, 1946.

²⁶ Hate strikes proved particularly common in the auto industry, which saw considerable white hostility toward black women and black job promotions in general. Such behavior precipitated the violence of the 1943 riots in Detroit, in which thirty-four were killed and nearly 2,000 arrested. Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 28-29, 100-102.

²⁷ Both Mine-Mill and UCAPAWA/FTA featured remarkably diverse executive boards, the latter of which had fully two-thirds minority representation in 1946. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 119.

²⁸ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 254-258; Corona with García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 116; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 212-

The Civil Rights Congress (CRC) provided yet another avenue for black-brown cooperation in the immediate post-war years. Founded in 1946 in New York City by local branch members of the National Negro Congress, International Labor Defense, and National Federation for Constitutional Liberties, CRC has been called the civil rights wing of the Communist Party in the United States. Not unlike the ILD's role in the Scottsboro, Alabama, case in 1931, CRC offered African Americans an alternative to the more careful NAACP for legal and publicity assistance.²⁹ After establishing a Los Angeles branch, the CRC emerged as not just a "vibrant community organization" interested in addressing housing and employment discrimination against both blacks and ethnic Mexicans, but also "the first line of defense for many black victims of police abuse."³⁰ In the summer of 1948 alone, CRC received more than twenty black requests for lawsuits against the Los Angeles Police Department, an agency notorious for its heavy-handed tactics against the city's minority groups. In fact, because the CRC had more than fifty lawyers at its service in the late 1940s, "no case was too small," including misdemeanor cases such as vagrancy,

227; and Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-1954* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 218-221.

²⁹ In the wake of wartime violence, the local NAACP had developed decent ties to Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron, who counted both Thomas Griffith and the Urban League's Covington as allies. Local NAACP leaders also were wary of taking on a case in which the defendant might be guilty, often making the CRC or one's church the only organizations to offer help. Sides, "The Civil Rights Congress in Los Angeles," 250-251. For Scottsboro, in which the ILD embarrassed the NAACP by quickly coming to the aid of nine black teenagers wrongfully convicted of rape, see Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969; 1979).

³⁰ Sides, "The Civil Rights Congress in Los Angeles," 240.

according to longtime organizer Emil Freed.³¹ And while CRC cultivated nationally a reputation as a defender of black rights, the Los Angeles chapter's own legal statistics showed that it often assisted ethnic Mexicans more than any other group. Between 1949 and 1950, more than one-third of its legal defenses involved people of Mexican descent. Routinely, the L.A. CRC used police brutality of ethnic Mexicans for publicity purposes, such as Guy Endore's report on the death of Eugene Montenegro, a 13-year-old shot in the back by a sheriff's deputy.³²

While CRC had an often hostile relationship with the NAACP, especially in Los Angeles, the organization had a good record for collaboration with other groups, including those with an ethnic Mexican constituency. In California and Colorado, CRC helped lead the charge for state-level Fair Employment Practices Committees, modeled after the federal agency responsible for investigating racial discrimination in the defense industry. Although primarily concerned with discrimination against blacks, Western offices of the FEPC also investigated claims by ethnic Mexicans. Joining the left-leaning CIO labor council, the state Democratic Party, and dozens of community organizations, the CRC in California in 1946 championed Proposition 11, which called for an elimination of discrimination in private industry and had been placed on the ballot after a statewide signature drive. But such unity

³¹ Sides, "The Civil Rights Congress in Los Angeles," 245.

³² Sides, "The Civil Rights Congress in Los Angeles," 233-257; Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1988), 333; and Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 276; and Fred H. Steinmetz, "Summary, Annual Report of Secretary of Lawyers Panel for Civil Rights," April 27, 1950, Guy Endore, "The Montenegro Case: A Study of the Coroner's Inquest," [1948?], and "Police Brutality Can Be Checked," [1952?], all in Reel 22, frames 0500-0538, 0874, 0929-0930, Papers of the Civil Rights Congress, microfilm edition (hereafter known as CRC).

withered under the fierce opposition of business interests and white supremacists, who organized the ironically named Committee of Tolerance to defeat the ballot initiative resoundingly amid a conservative Republican surge in both state and national politics. A similar proposal also championed by CRC and CIO unions in Colorado went down to defeat, while one in the New Mexico legislature, pushed by the NAACP and Spanish-speaking miners, won by the smallest of margins, 25-24.³³

A key coalitional partner of the CRC – and other African American groups – during this time period was the Asociación Nacional México Americana (ANMA), an ethnic Mexican civil rights organization based in Denver and which, at its peak, boasted some thirty chapters across the Southwest. Founded by mostly working class members of Mine-Mill in 1949, ANMA echoed many of El Congreso’s earlier priorities, unapologetically criticizing police brutality, housing discrimination, deportation raids, media stereotyping, and even U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. In its four-year existence, ANMA also maintained a commitment to collaboration with “the most oppressed people in our country,” African Americans, who were seen as a radical vanguard.³⁴ “The Mexican People in their struggles for first-class citizenship are becoming more and more aware that the only way to win this fight is to have the closest unity with our strongest ally, the Negro people,” declared ANMA

³³ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 258-260; Gómez-Quiñones, *Mexican American Labor*, 164; *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, October 7 and 20, and November 7, 1946; and (Denver) *Colorado Statesman*, May 6, 1950, Denver CRC Organizational Secretary Nancy Kleinbord letter to CRC Executive Secretary William Patterson, August 4, 1950, and CRC newsletter, January 1951, all in Reel 24, frames 0082, 0087, 0286, CRC.

³⁴ *Progreso*, January-February 1951, in Box 206, Folder 11, Records of Western Federation of Miners and the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, Norlin Library, University of Colorado, Boulder (hereafter known as MMSW).

official Virginia Ruiz.³⁵ ANMA literature credited earlier unity for the breakdown of defense industry discrimination and saw opportunities to join blacks on a number of fronts, including the legal defense of wrongfully accused African Americans, the fight against mass deportation of agricultural workers, and the creation of a national FEPC. “Together,” concluded Alfonso Sena, a ANMA board member, “we can stop this discrimination.”³⁶

CRC already had a history of working with Mine-Mill, most prominently in the defense of Humberto Silex, whose El Paso local had helped pioneer cooperation between black and ethnic Mexican miners. Silex’s years of effective labor leadership, including solidarity marches with union workers in Mexico, prompted repeated deportation attempts by the government. Therefore, ANMA proved a natural ally of CRC in fighting police brutality and other forms of discrimination in Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, and elsewhere. For instance, in February 1950 in what was known as the Maravilla incident, Los Angeles sheriff’s deputies and the county riot squad raided an East Los Angeles baby shower, arresting 50 ethnic Mexicans, including children and pregnant women, while using abusive tactics and language. ANMA publicly protested, questioning the warrantless searches, and CRC provided lawyers to challenge them in court. During the same month, ANMA sponsored the area’s first ethnic Mexican observation of Negro History Week and stressed its importance to members “because it affords an opportunity to become more conscious of

³⁵ García, *Mexican Americans*, 222.

³⁶ Quote by Alfonso Sena in Report of Alfonso Sena, National Board Member from Colorado, n.d., Box 206, Folder 11, MMSW. Also, copies of *Progreso*, ANMA’s newspaper and program for second annual ANMA convention, July 12-13, 1952, and “Let’s Work Together,” ANMA flier, n.d., all in Box 206, Folder 11, MMSW; and García, *Mexican Americans*, 200-203.

the contributions that Negro people have made in the fight against oppression of all minorities throughout our history.”³⁷

* * *

While much of the 1940s suggested the potential for multiethnic collaboration through El Congreso, CRC, ANMA, and many of the CIO unions, these organizations increasingly found themselves on the defensive amid the shrill and growing Red Scare engulfing American political culture. The end of World War II left the United States and Soviet Union triumphant, but a new competition for global influence emerged between the former allies, sparking a growing tension that soon seeped into national and local politics – often to the point of hysteria. As early as 1946, after the CIO unions declared victory in their strikes, launched Operation Dixie, and spoke of leading a vigorous industrial democracy into the future, re-energized conservative Republicans, including future president Richard M. Nixon, used vicious anti-communist red-baiting to defeat New Deal Democrats in the first congressional election since President Roosevelt’s death.³⁸ A new, decidedly more conservative Republican majority in 1947 leveled a steady drumbeat of soft-on-communism charges against President Harry Truman’s administration, from the State Department to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). While the president unveiled the Truman Doctrine and enacted a loyalty program for federal employees in desperate

³⁷ Quote in García, *Mexican Americans*, 222. Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 256-258, 276; García, *Mexican Americans*, 187, 220-221; and Horne, *Communist Front*, 314, 320, 333.

³⁸ Operation Dixie was the CIO Southern Organizing Committee’s failed attempt to invigorate industrial unionism among low-wage southern workers, especially the widespread textile industry. See Zieger, *The CIO*, 227-241.

hopes of stemming panic over “the Communist bugaboo” at home, Congress swiftly passed the Taft-Hartley Act, designed to limit sharply the power of organized labor.³⁹ Although it upheld the right to collective bargaining, the new legislation placed considerable legal burdens on labor unions, banned secondary boycotts, allowed states to outlaw union security provisions (or establish “right-to-work” laws), and required trade union leaders who worked with the NLRB to sign an anti-communist affidavit. If they refused, as many union activists did, they lost their standing with the federal agency enforcing anti-discrimination practices.⁴⁰

All of these measures placed unions – and those organizations that relied upon them for membership and financial support – at a severe disadvantage as agents of social and political reform. Nearly all organizations advocating reform came under fire during the domestic Cold War, but particularly caught were the various leftist organizations with communist ties, sympathies, or at least former CP members from the 1930s. While the extent of communist influence and how that translated practically in the CIO unions often were overstated by their critics, the most important leftist organizations did feature party members in key leadership positions, including the presidents of FTA, Mine-Mill, and the Fur and Leather Workers, and regional directors and staffers in many more. And a large number of these people not only embraced communism, but also mistakenly believed that the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin was a model of humanity. Not surprisingly then, the

³⁹ David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 550-551. In announcing massive military aid packages to non-democratic, anti-communist regimes in Greece and Turkey, Truman established a new foreign policy doctrine in which the world was simplistically divided between good and evil, free and slave. Containment of communism became official policy, both home and abroad.

⁴⁰ Zieger, *The CIO*, 241-252.

leadership of these unions refused to sign the anti-communist affidavit of Taft-Hartley, while many non-communists did as well, solely on principle. But while these unions stood in the vanguard in regard to race and gender, featured spirited rank-and-file participation, and were, in the words of one scholar, “more advanced than their counterparts in their grasp of the changing character of the labor force,” the larger confederation’s primary consideration eventually became how to marginalize the CIO’s communist-influenced affiliates in a virulently anti-communist era.⁴¹

By the early 1950s, anti-communist efforts had marginalized or destroyed much of what was born out of the Popular Front – and the nascent multiethnic vision these organizations had tried to champion. Within the CIO, a fierce anti-communist thrust began in earnest during the 1948 campaign, in which the labor confederation made a decisive turn toward electoral politics as part of President Truman’s reconstituted center-left coalition. In 1947, the confederation’s national leaders removed radical ILWU president Harry Bridges and a year later rescinded the charters of the California and Los Angeles CIO councils, both of which had proven aggressive in combating racial discrimination. Pointing to the poor showing of Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party ticket in 1948 and the massive hostility Operation Dixie sparked in the South as proof of leftist illegitimacy, CIO leaders mounted decertification campaigns against several international unions. CIO head Philip Murray succinctly stated this either-or perspective: “It is ... Communism and anti-Communism.

⁴¹ Quote in Zieger, *The CIO*, 256; see also 253-261.

There is no question about that.”⁴² During the next year and a half, Murray and vocal anti-communist allies like the United Auto Workers’ Walter Reuther drove eleven affiliated unions out of CIO, including the UE, FTA, Mine-Mill, ILWU, United Furniture Workers, and Farm Equipment and Metal Workers of America (FE). In addition, CIO established alternative non-communist affiliates to raid the expelled unions, something AFL unions and the Teamsters had been doing for years. Combined with stepped-up efforts by employers such as the California Sanitary Canning Company to divide workers racially, few affiliates other than Mine-Mill managed to survive. Once the most egalitarian and female-led labor organization in the nation, FTA merged with two other unions and such principles all but vanished.⁴³

A few unions with multiethnic traditions survived the purges but then encountered a 1950s economy already transitioning away from industrial jobs into one increasingly dominated by non-unionized service work. In fact, 1956 became the first year in which white-collar jobs outpaced blue-collar positions. Mine-Mill, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), and the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), for instance, all managed to maintain an active and multiethnic rank and file during this transition, yet they expended most of their resources on narrow workplace issues, most importantly protecting earlier job gains. A combination of corporate decisions to relocate plants to smaller, non-union cities and achievements in automation led to a massive

⁴² Zieger, *The CIO*, 277.

⁴³ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 270-271; Zieger, *The CIO*, 277-293; Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 116-123; and Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*, 368-413.

hemorrhaging of jobs in one-time boom towns like Detroit and Chicago, where blacks and ethnic Mexicans often worked together in the plants. While Detroit witnessed four automobile industry recessions during the decade and subsequent layoffs, UPWA faced dozens of plant closings in Chicago, hitting black-majority locals the hardest. Such economic anxiety made deliberate attempts at interethnic organizing even less of a priority. Little did union activists know that Mine-Mill's victory after a two-year strike at the Empire Zinc Company in New Mexico – made famous by the film “Salt of the Earth” – would prove to be one of labor's only triumphs of the decade. In 1955, the AFL and CIO merged, capping off years of restructuring and officially representing the end to any significant labor union radicalism for at least a decade.⁴⁴

Both ANMA and CRC survived into the 1950s, but found their influence increasingly diminished. More than two years before Senator Joseph McCarthy launched his infamous witch hunt, fending off anti-communist attacks had surpassed the resources these organizations spent on multiethnic efforts for better wages, benefits, and fair employment practices committees and against police brutality and other forms of racial discrimination. CRC spent considerable energy teamed up with leftist unions to defend their leaders from inquiries by the House Un-American Activities Committee and charges under the Smith and McCarran acts, including, in the case of ethnic Mexican activists, constant attempts at deportation. Luisa Moreno, Humberto Silex, Armando Davila, and Refugio Martinez were

⁴⁴ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 133-135; Horowitz, *Negro and White, Unite and Fight*, 254-255; Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 117; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 143-144; and Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 84-86.

just a few of those who faced deportation. Although most deportation efforts failed, Moreno and other activists tired of official harassment left the country on their own accord – a pattern that also played out during the massive deportation campaigns of the 1930s and Operation Wetback in the 1950s. While most of these fights took place in legal and internal union proceedings of some kind, activists also took to the streets. In late 1950, for instance, a multiethnic group of Denver CRC members celebrated Bill of Rights Week in style: blacks, ethnic Mexicans, and whites dressed as colonial minutemen, complete with fife and drum, marched through downtown to the state capital and called for the repeal of the recently passed Internal Security (McCarran) Act, which sanctioned federal registration and monitoring of all “subversive” organizations. In such an oppressive environment, efforts at reform, particularly multiethnic ones, became harder and harder to sustain.⁴⁵

More than anything else, the expanded police power represented by the McCarran Act eventually destroyed ANMA in 1954 and CRC in 1956. Predisposed to believe that both groups were nothing more than communist fronts, the FBI used undercover agents and disgruntled former members as informants to build the cases they sought no matter how credible the evidence was. Undoubtedly, most leftist organizations had either members or former members of the CP in their midst, but FBI agents used this often unreliable information to claim vaguely that scores of members “identified” with the Communist Party – and that unaffiliated others were clearly fellow travelers ready to subvert the U.S. government. Most alarmingly, associating with other suspect organizations or holding

⁴⁵ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 270-273; Horne, *Communist Front*, 317; Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 84; and Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 209-226.

similar ideological stances on an issue to the CP reinforced the agency's conclusions. In the case of ANMA, agents in the FBI's Colorado field office concluded that comparable statements in support of a \$1 minimum wage in 1951 was irrefutable evidence of a communist conspiracy; they also noted a belief in black-Mexican unity as another clear sign. As a result, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover recommended and the attorney general agreed to list ANMA as a subversive organization. Combined with the deportation drives and harassment by local red squads, the designation proved a veritable kiss of death to participate in mainstream policy debates, raise funds, or recruit substantially. CRC's demise proved similar – the result of mass convictions of CRC officers including national director William Patterson under the Smith Act and the atrophying of community support through organizations on the defensive themselves. Thus, the Cold War assault forced ANMA, CRC, and most of their CIO allies from the scene, leaving a far narrower set of options for progressive, antiracist activists.⁴⁶

What emerged in the early 1950s instead proved a far more limited civil rights agenda, one that de-emphasized economic justice, issues of class, and the workplace as a site for anti-racist activism. This was a direction particularly stressed by the nation's premiere civil rights organization, the NAACP. Not unlike CIO, the NAACP's Walter White, Roy Wilkins, and other national officers deliberately distanced the organization from communist rhetoric and organizations, often keeping "a close eye on the activities of communists and alleged communists in the local branches," according to Manfred Berg. But while Berg

⁴⁶ García, *Mexican Americans*, 222-227; and Sides, "You Understand My Conviction," 254-257.

claims that these “did not even come close to a ‘purge,’” considerable evidence suggests otherwise.⁴⁷ The national NAACP isolated leftists by refusing to work with groups like CRC, remaining largely silent when known CP members faced arrests or harassment simply for their political views, and going out of its way to trumpet its loyalty and patriotism to the United States. Most importantly, NAACP isolation indirectly undermined the legitimacy of economic and social justice arguments advocated by CRC and others. In other words, the nation’s premier civil rights organization at times contributed to the shrill environment of intolerance and the subsequent narrowing of the civil rights agenda by performing at least soft purges. Of course, it should be noted that, as seen in places such as Mississippi and North Carolina, local chapters did not uniformly carry out policy dictated by the national office. In southern California, CRC and NAACP representatives found themselves on the same side more than once in defense of wrongfully arrested or convicted minorities. But this proved to be an exception.⁴⁸

Rather, the national NAACP and its legal arm, the Legal and Educational Defense Fund, pursued campaigns to overturn *de jure* school segregation and race-based disenfranchisement such as the poll tax. Nothing short of revolutionary in many ways, these NAACP campaigns by their nature targeted the racial caste system in the South while leaving much of northern and western discrimination in jobs, schools, and criminal justice to fester.

⁴⁷ Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 135-136.

⁴⁸ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 131-139; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 165-171; Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, especially Chapters 5-6; and Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 43-66.

Quality education, more sympathetic and responsive elected officials, and the destruction of the most obvious symbols of white supremacy could contribute to black economic empowerment not just in the South but everywhere. But in reality, such efforts relegated issues of economic justice broadly defined as nothing more than implicit goals. While union schemes for income redistribution and worker solidarity smacked of pro-Soviet communism and socialism in the context of the Cold War, NAACP leaders believed that arguments for voting rights and quality education were rooted in American citizenship, particularly the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Members of Presidents Truman's and Eisenhower's Departments of Justice also viewed striking down the legal basis for school segregation in the South as important to the propaganda war against the Soviet Union. Thus, the NAACP's legal assault against Jim Crow in public accommodations set the tone for the freedom struggle of the 1950s. Explicit calls for economic justice through income redistribution, jobs programs, and collective bargaining faded from their earlier prominence.⁴⁹

The NAACP's closest ethnic Mexican counterpart, the Texas-based League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), also pursued a legal strategy – but one that intertwined citizenship, whiteness, and patriotism. While scholars of LULAC rightly acknowledge the importance of the first two, they often disregard the centrality of patriotism and Americanism in LULAC's identity since its founding in 1929 and how it might affect the

⁴⁹ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 140-165; Mark Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 155; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 287-314; and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

organization's activities in the first ten years of the Cold War.⁵⁰ If anything, the Cold War ideology of Americanism underscored LULAC officials' hesitance to reach out to African Americans by discouraging incessant challenges to U.S. laws and customs, including the nation's racial hierarchy. Although there was occasional correspondence between Thurgood Marshall and LULAC officials such as George I. Sánchez, LULAC officials routinely fought racial discrimination with solutions that distanced the ethnic Mexican experience from that of blacks, reinforced the latter's segregation, and made ethnic Mexicans appear in the process more "American." Throughout the 1940s and 1950s and into the 1960s, LULAC lawyers doggedly portrayed ethnic Mexicans as just another group of white American citizens, light-skinned, and born in the United States, and therefore legally mandated to attend white schools in racially segregated Texas and elsewhere. "[T]here is no 'Mexican' race," LULAC president Raoul Cortéz assured President Truman in 1948. "The citizens of Mexico, as well as citizens of the United States who are of Mexican ancestry, belong to the Caucasian race." LULAC official Hector García, who later founded the veterans-oriented American G.I. Forum (AGIF) in Texas, echoed Cortéz's position, while neither questioned the segregation of African Americans. Despite his organization's own reformist activities,

⁵⁰ Strangely, scholars comment little on Cold War politics and how it dovetailed with LULAC's identity and founding. Craig A. Kaplowitz, *LULAC, Mexican Americans, and National Policy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Benjamin Márquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican-American Political Organization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Blanton, "George I. Sánchez, Ideology, and Whiteness in the Making of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement, 1930-1960"; Foley, "Partly Colored or Other White," "Straddling the Color Line," and "Becoming Hispanic"; and García, *Mexican Americans*, 46-59.

García eschewed any identification with civil rights, saying that, “Personally I hate the word.”⁵¹

Even the legal challenge in *Mendez v. Westminster*, a 1946 case in which the NAACP offered a “friend of the court” brief in support of the ethnic Mexican plaintiffs, proved not to be a lasting or particularly deep collaboration. In the case, LULAC attorneys argued that the Orange County, California, school district used language instruction as a smokescreen to discriminate against otherwise “white” children of Mexican descent. The courts eventually ordered the plaintiffs’ admission into white schools, in part thanks to the use of social science research. But the courts also left race-based segregated schooling in place. Several years later, NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyer Robert Carter successfully pitched a challenge to Jim Crow itself using *Mendez* as a model to portray segregation as corrosive to African Americans’ personal sense of inferiority. While it succeeded, the Legal Defense Fund’s case also highlighted a key difference between NAACP officials and their ethnic Mexican counterparts in LULAC, AGIF, and the few other groups to survive Cold War intimidation. In an environment in which society rewarded patriotism and loyalty above all else, ethnic Mexican attempts to equate these traits with whiteness remained a substantial barrier to interethnic collaboration.⁵²

⁵¹ Quote in Foley, “Partly Colored or Other White,” in *Beyond Black and White*, ed. Cole and Parker, 136. Also, Kaplowitz, *LULAC, Mexican Americans, and National Policy*, 43-46; and Blanton, “George I. Sanchez, Ideology, and Whiteness,” 569-604.

⁵² Kaplowitz, *LULAC, Mexican Americans, and National Policy*, 43-46; Foley, “Partly Colored or Other White,” 123-141; García, *Mexican Americans*, 46-59; and Juan Williams, *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* (New York: Times Books, 1998), 196-197.

Consistent with its focus on citizenship, LULAC favored strict immigration curbs – and, with the exception of the Asociación Nacional México Americana, this became the norm for ethnic Mexican organizations in the 1950s. To differing degrees, the American G.I. Forum, the AFL’s National Farm Labor Union (NFLU), and the Community Service Organization (CSO) reflected a more cautious take on immigrants in Cold War America. With its history rooted in the radical politics of the Depression-era Southern Tenant Farmers Union and in organizing some of the poorest, hardest-to-reach workers, NFLU held great potential for bucking the decade’s conservative trend. But the traditionally white, craft union-oriented AFL remained skeptical of organizing such workers. Moreover, while agricultural workers gamely attempted to stop production multiple times, growers effectively counteracted such maneuvers, using a mix of publicity, political influence, and the federal *bracero* program to break each strike. This guest worker program, designed to provide farm labor during wartime shortages, had become a devastating tool to depress wages and undermine collective bargaining as growers simply brought in more *braceros* and undocumented workers to resume production. Thus, even NFLU remained silent when, in response to a recession-spawned labor glut, the federal government launched the oppressive deportation campaign Operation Wetback. Characterized by many as worse than the massive “voluntary” deportation efforts of the 1930s, Operation Wetback ensnared more than one million ethnic Mexicans in 1954 alone. But while the operation removed a lot of extra workers during the recessions of the 1950s, NFLU never gained sufficient traction and was replaced by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in 1960.⁵³

⁵³ Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, Chapter 6; David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans*,

Called “California’s most important Chicano association,” CSO, in contrast, developed a reputation for compassionate and effective aid for migrant workers, including undocumented immigrants.⁵⁴ Yet to avoid charges of communism, its leaders made a point to situate the organization to the right of ANMA on immigration and NFLU on class and culture and often echoed LULAC’s rhetoric of citizenship. Founded as a political organization to elect future Congressman Edward Roybal as Los Angeles’ first ethnic Mexican councilman, CSO evolved into a voter registration powerhouse and clearinghouse for migrant services with more than twenty chapters across the Southwest.⁵⁵ Invigorated by Saul Alinsky protégé Fred Ross and the funding and precepts of the Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation, CSO went to extraordinary lengths to seek and incorporate grassroots input in its work. In 1952, Ross discovered a young César Chávez, who after some reluctance became a key organizer until he left in frustration ten years later. If CSO activists demonstrated a unique devotion to grassroots relationship-building through tools such as house meetings, their radical approach rarely translated into equally bold rhetoric or public positions. Rather, throughout the 1950s, CSO became increasingly narrow in its interests and efforts, including ones to reach African Americans. While CSO’s voter registration drives emphasized bolstering ethnic Mexican voter participation, early on they

Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 155-168; Vargas, “In the Years of Darkness and Torment,” 388-391; and Acuña, *Occupied America*, 290-292, 304-306.

⁵⁴ Acuña, *Occupied America*, 314.

⁵⁵ Roybal lost the 1947 election by 300 votes, but won in 1949 to become the council’s first minority member of the twentieth century. He remained the council’s only minority until 1962 when he won a Congressional seat; three African Americans, including future mayor Tom Bradley, were elected the following year.

also viewed blacks as potential Roybal supporters and relished more generally the empowerment other minorities might receive as well. For instance, CSO's Herman Gallegos related one exchange between government officials and their organization. The government responded initially "if we give registrars to the Mexicans, we'll have to give the Blacks their own registrars, the Japanese their own, and every other group will want their own as well," to which CSO responded, "That sounds good to us."⁵⁶ But by the middle of the decade, if interethnic collaboration had ever been a core CSO principle, its primary work suggested otherwise.⁵⁷

Thus, on the eve of the "daybreak of freedom," a considerable number of weakened civil rights and social justice organizations persisted, serving African Americans or ethnic Mexicans, but not both.⁵⁸ Intergroup collaboration proved almost as rare. The promise of a decade earlier, in which black and brown activists routinely found common cause on a variety of issues, had faded with those individuals and groups crushed or marginalized by the domestic Cold War and their subsequent defensive responses. An economy in transition, leaving some industries behind, took care of much of the rest. The window for significant

⁵⁶ Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, 166.

⁵⁷ Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, Chapter 7; Vargas, "In the Years of Darkness and Torment," 398-399; Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 168-172; Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975), 97-148; Kenneth C. Burt, "The Power of a Mobilized Citizenry and Coalition Politics: The 1949 Election of Edward R. Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council," *Southern California Quarterly* 85 (2003): 413-438. See also Fred Ross, *Conquering Goliath: César Chávez at the Beginning* (Keene, California: El Taller Grafico Press, 1989).

⁵⁸ King coined the phrase to describe the rise of nonviolent protest during the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-1956. Richard Bartlett Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*, with a foreword by Martin Luther King Jr. (Nyack, N.Y.: Fellowship Publications, 1959).

black-brown activism – if never terribly wide before – appeared to have been closed and locked.

* * *

It was in this Cold War context in which Martin Luther King Jr. came of age. Although he recalled the bread lines that wrapped around the corners of Atlanta’s “Sweet Auburn” community, King grew up in a comfortable, middle-class family relatively insulated from the worst of the Depression, if not the racial caste system. From his father, who in thirteen years went from being a poor, uneducated son of a sharecropper to preacher of the venerable Ebenezer Baptist Church, King Jr. learned to value hard work and to disdain Jim Crow. The latter earned Martin Luther King Sr. a reputation as one who adopted an “expansive notion of rights appropriate to a high-consumption society and a nation at war with racist ‘warfare states.’”⁵⁹ Yet the elder King’s immense pride in his success, including a house on the stately Bishop’s Row, also curbed his thinking on economic justice. This preoccupation with status was passed along to his son, who initially sought a doctorate mainly for its prestige.⁶⁰

In his schooling and early career, King Jr. did engage with ways to accomplish economic justice beyond his father’s self-help philosophy – part of a larger debate that flourished among liberal academics in a way that it did not in the Cold War’s narrowing public space. While Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays believed he had failed to arouse “student interest in the issues of the outside world,” including King as an

⁵⁹ Jackson, *From Civil Right to Human Rights*, 30.

⁶⁰ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 27-29; and Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 48, 53-63.

undergraduate, King's graduate studies at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University greatly expanded his horizons.⁶¹ Not only did he become immersed in the Social Gospel and its commitment to the poor, but King also consumed the works of Karl Marx. He eventually rejected communism because of its "historical materialism and ethical relativism," but maintained a critique of the unfettered capitalism and "success ethic" favored by his father, ever more so as anti-communism gained ground after World War II. As Thomas Jackson suggests, "The cold war intellectual climate shaped King's public discourse, but he also resisted a liberalism that reduced racism to prejudice and separated racial and class inequality."⁶²

Yet while King engaged with poverty and economic justice on an intellectual level, it did not translate immediately into far-reaching policies.⁶³ When King Jr. arrived in Montgomery in early 1955, he challenged the town's black middle class, many of whom sat in the pews of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, to become politically active. He set up new church committees to serve the poor and to support the NAACP. Undoubtedly, championing the civil rights organization in Alabama – and E.D. Nixon's local chapter

⁶¹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 60.

⁶² Quote in Jackson, *From Civil Right to Human Rights*, 40. Also, Jackson, 30-47; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 69-80; and Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 92-95.

⁶³ Most King biographers still depict his decisions to tackle economic justice, in Chicago and then the Poor People's Campaign, as a clear break with the movement leader's past. In an important revisionist work, Thomas Jackson argues this commitment was a much longer trajectory, yet my reading of the sources suggests a considerable gap between King's evolving intellectual position and his own activism, at least in the 1950s. See Branch, *Parting the Waters*; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*; Ling, *Martin Luther King Jr.*; and Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*.

specifically – required courage for the 26-year-old preacher new to town. But supporting the NAACP financially did not necessarily indicate a commitment to economic justice or a rejection of black bourgeoisie tendencies on King’s part. It certainly did not match the class-based activism made by labor and movement activists in 1945 or 1965. While thrust into challenging segregated buses in the 1955 boycott, of which he reluctantly became the spokesman, King took much longer to put into action whatever sympathies he may have had toward a quasi-socialism.⁶⁴

During the next several years, the era’s anti-communism continued to affect what reformers, including King, could do or say about the pursuit of economic justice for blacks or anyone else. While the Cold War allowed a certain language of freedom to be used in the propaganda war against the Soviet Union, its acceptance did not extend to issues of jobs or income. Given chances to pursue massive income redistribution plans or address poverty to a mass audience, King passed.⁶⁵ Well aware of how damaging charges of communism could be, especially in the South, King instead called for an attack on poverty and racism primarily through fair play and personal responsibility – as suggested by his sermons and speech during the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage of Freedom in Washington, D.C. In *Stride Toward Freedom*, written on the heels of the Montgomery bus boycott, he echoes this call and makes only one

⁶⁴ King, “Recommendations to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church,” September 5, 1954, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Volume 1*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph Luker, and Penny A. Russell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). See also Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 112-142.

⁶⁵ King was a regular contributor to *Ebony* magazine and occasionally appeared on national television news programs. Dr. Francis Townsend, whose old-age pension plan in the 1930s made him something of a folk hero, also asked him to consider a wide-ranging program to address poverty, but never heard back from King. See Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 79-81.

specific policy prescription for the federal government: a gradual path toward southern school desegregation, which he calls the center of the storm.⁶⁶

The Cold War context also fed King's healthy skepticism of organized labor – a key potential ally in fighting racism but perhaps the largest institutional victim of an anti-reform climate. King counted a handful of labor leaders as allies, including Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers, Ralph Helstein of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, and A. Philip Randolph, longtime civil rights leader and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Yet overall, King largely distrusted the labor establishment and its practices. For every majority-minority packinghouse workers local dedicated to fighting discrimination, there were many more AFL-CIO affiliate unions that perpetuated blatant racism in their locals, apprenticeship programs, and vocational schools – and it was these unions that garnered most of his attention. In *Stride for Freedom*, King assails the “organized labor oligarchy” for focusing on the narrowest of bread-and-butter issues and tolerating rank-and-file membership in White Citizens Councils and red-baiting of union reformers. “In every section of the country one can find local unions existing as a serious and vicious obstacle when the Negro seeks jobs or upgrading of employment,” King writes. “... The AFL-CIO must use all of the powerful forces at its command to enforce the principles it has professed.”⁶⁷ King's critique of labor seems so complete, in fact, that it overshadows the

⁶⁶ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 196, 211-224; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 85-87, 90-94; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 853; James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97; and Greta de Jong, *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁶⁷ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 204-205.

few unions that assisted King and the Montgomery Improvement Association during the boycott. Such treatment demonstrated both the abstract promise of labor unions and the maddening reality of their influence – or lack thereof – in the 1950s.⁶⁸

King’s advocacy of economic justice began to sharpen gradually in the early 1960s, first as a new generation of activists flooded into the freedom struggle and then as academics, politicians, and other members of the liberal elite “discovered” poverty. Students in college, high school, and even grade school joined the movement as part of the sit-ins and Freedom Rides, the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and reinvigoration of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and any number of rallies and protests for better housing, education, and jobs in the North and West. Students, of course, had been involved heavily in the freedom struggle, from applying for school transfers to staging impromptu sit-ins in places such as Durham, North Carolina. Thousands of NAACP Youth Council members marched on Washington in 1958 to protest the slow pace of school desegregation. But it was not until 1960 in that the students seemed to take charge. For the next several years, older leaders such as King and the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins reacted to student challenges and actions as much as anything else. Whether the “kids” taught about raising sharecropper’ wages in the freedom schools of Mississippi, protested job and housing discrimination by blocking traffic to the New York World’s Fair, or endorsed the ethnic Mexican and Filipino farmworker strikes against grape growers in

⁶⁸ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 202-205; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 41; Andrew E. Kersten, *A. Philip Randolph: A Life I the Vanguard* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 249-278; and Horowitz, *Negro and White, United and Fought*, 206-208. The packinghouse workers, for instance, provided financial support to sustain taxi services for blacks who normally used the buses. Funds also helped those who quit their jobs to help the cause.

California, students laid important groundwork for men like King to address economic justice head on.⁶⁹

The gradual transition toward economic justice activism also dovetailed with a national “rediscovery” of poverty by policymakers and academics. Although the federal government’s War on Poverty had many roots, its primary impulses – as well as its many contradictions and flaws – emerged from a belief that poverty in America could be eliminated through programs designed to induce behavioral changes among the poor and *without* any major restructuring of the economy or distribution of wealth. In many ways, it proved a classic U.S. counter to Soviet-style communism and its rhetoric of equality. Academics such as Gunnar Myrdal and John Kenneth Galbraith argued that, despite a relatively strong economy throughout the 1950s, a vicious cycle of poverty trapped many Americans, placing them further and further behind their fellow citizens. Since publishing *An American Dilemma* in 1944, Myrdal had emphasized blocked opportunities, or “exclusion,” particularly for African Americans. In *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, Galbraith broadened this notion and questioned absolute definitions of poverty, suggesting that massive inequality – even if incomes were “adequate for survival” – was dangerous for democracy. Galbraith called for large increases in social services and public institutions such as schools and parks, but he stopped short of calling for an income maintenance program,

⁶⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*; Greene, *Our Separate Ways*; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*; Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 136-137; Brian Purnell, “‘Drive Awhile for Freedom’: Brooklyn CORE’s 1964 Stall-In and Public Discourses on Protest Violence,” in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 45-76; and Araiza, “For the Freedom of Other Men.”

only doing so in the book's 1969 edition. Others including sociologists Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin and psychologist Kenneth Clark built on these structuralist analyses to make cases about the role of juvenile delinquency on equal opportunity, especially in urban areas. All of these arguments, in one form or another, were then popularized in 1962 by Michael Harrington who, in *The Other America*, painted a stark portrayal of those forty to fifty million people living in poverty, often hidden from middle class Americans.⁷⁰

Harrington's book became a bestseller, its arguments resonating with influential policymakers such as David Hackett and Walter Heller inside President John F. Kennedy's administration. Kennedy himself had showed only mild interest in issues of poverty, supporting existing programs such as Social Security. But while he was visibly shaken by the destitution he witnessed in a 1960 campaign trip to West Virginia, Kennedy remained a president consumed by foreign policy and the Cold War. During most of his administration, anti-poverty programs were limited to basic area redevelopment and job training legislation. Yet he also brought a younger generation of academics such as Hackett and Ohlin in as policymakers, who were open to structural arguments about poverty in a way that previous presidential aides had not been. Commissions on juvenile delinquency and automation, as well as Hackett's Mobilization for Youth, sparked intense research and discussions but little else initially. In the spring of 1963, Kennedy asked Heller and others to formulate a broader anti-poverty plan to unveil in early 1964. Despite these efforts, it was only after Kennedy's

⁷⁰ James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981; 2000), 88-121; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944; 1962); Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1962); and John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

assassination that aides developed a genuine urgency toward building an anti-poverty plan. The new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, wanted the defeat of poverty to be one of his great legacies.⁷¹

An admirer of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, Johnson preferred sweeping policy initiatives and viewed the War on Poverty as not only a way to leave his lasting imprint on domestic policy, but also to make the larger argument that the U.S. system best produced prosperity and opportunity for all. In January 1964, Johnson unveiled the War on Poverty and, by August, the Economic Opportunity Act had passed. Throughout the year, Johnson used soaring rhetoric about building the Great Society, in which all Americans shared in the nation's abundance and liberty. "For more than 30 years, from Social Security to the war against poverty, we have diligently worked to enlarge the freedom of man," Johnson declared at the Democratic National Convention that year. "As a result, Americans tonight are freer to live as they want to live, to pursue their ambitions, to meet their desires to raise their families than at any time in all or our glorious history." But the reality did not match the rhetoric, which was trumped by the president's desire for consensus and far more explicit policies to fight communism.⁷²

⁷¹ Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, 122-137; and Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper TorchBooks, 1984), 107-122.

⁷² Quote in Lyndon Johnson, "Remarks Before the National Convention Upon Accepting the Nomination," August 27, 1964, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640827.asp>, accessed January 3, 2008. See also Johnson, "Great Society Speech," May 22, 1964, Ann Arbor, Michigan, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640522.asp>, accessed January 17, 2008; and Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60-62.

Even before the Economic Opportunity Act's final passage, confusion reigned over how exactly the War on Poverty would be fought and its accomplishments measured. While some aspects had a traditional programmatic hue such as the Job Corps and the Head Start early education program, other elements proved particularly controversial, and potentially radical. Community action programs (CAPs) and their central tenet of "maximum feasible participation" of the poor offered a unique opportunity to society's neediest. Overlapping with civil rights activists' increasingly louder calls for federal resources in African American and other minority communities, the CAPs suddenly empowered already energized poor people with government funds and, in some cases, jobs. While most CAPs remained under the firm control of local elites such as Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, others became fascinating experiments in grassroots democratic action, much to the consternation of local white officials and the White House. Johnson had little patience for such challenges to traditional hierarchy, putting his paternalism on display to one newspaper editor in language far crasser than his public platitudes: "I'm going to try to teach these niggers that don't know anything, how to work for themselves instead of just breeding, and I'm going to try to teach these Mexicans that can't talk English to learn it, so they can work for themselves."⁷³ Much of the community action programs' revolutionary power diminished as local elites regained control, often by marginalizing activists through manipulation of funds and police power. But perhaps most importantly, the programs declined because of other funding commitments by the administration. As the Economic Opportunity Act made its way

⁷³ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 192-193.

through Congress, an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam sparked a massive escalation of another war in 1965 – the Vietnam War, which sapped federal budgets of billions of dollars annually for the next decade.⁷⁴

The relative weakening of the shrillest anti-communist rhetoric also opened a window to such reform. Certainly, charges of communism against activists remained commonplace, best illustrated by longtime FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s campaign to destroy Martin Luther King Jr. and the work of police department “red squads” in scores of cities including Chicago and Denver. Other civil rights organizations also faced charges of communist influence. For instance, the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF) in Kentucky, headed by Anne and Carl Braden, constantly fended off such accusations. But red-baiting had lost some of its vigor. Not only were the anti-poverty initiatives coming out of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations not particularly radical, both presidents tried to insulate themselves by framing their domestic policies in Cold War terms. In addition, the influence of the feared House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had declined from its power in the early 1950s, when just the risk of being subpoenaed had the desired effect of suppressing dissent. In 1962, HUAC subpoenaed activists from Women Strike for Peace, an anti-nuclear proliferation group that emphasized maternal rhetoric in their opposition to war and increasingly U.S. foreign policy. But rather than be marginalized, the

⁷⁴ Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty*, 138-149. A growing body of scholarship is challenging the older notion that the War on Poverty and its community action programs in particular were colossal failures. Although fleeting at times, politicization of the poor remains an important legacy of the CAPs. For instance, see Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); and Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia, forthcoming).

women deftly controlled the hearings, using more than a little humor in their answers, charming the press and leaving the committee members looking ridiculous and petty. Depicting a committee member turning to his baffled colleagues, one Herblock political cartoon joked, “I came in late, which was it that was un-American – women or peace?”⁷⁵ The FBI responded to the hearings with stepped-up surveillance, a pattern for most social justice groups for the rest of the decade. But by the mid-1960s, the Cold War’s power to silence, while still potent, was not what it once was.⁷⁶

King and other civil rights activists who met Johnson early in the process saw the War on Poverty as a small but significant step in the right direction, even as they themselves grappled over what was the best solution to black poverty in 1963 and 1964. If President Johnson did not acknowledge publicly the black freedom movement’s integral role in any successful anti-poverty program, King made it clear how central the plight of blacks was to defeating poverty. “[H]e is aware that those caught most fiercely in the grip of this economic holocaust are Negroes,” King wrote, prodding Johnson by giving him the benefit of the doubt. “Therefore, he has set the twin goal of a battle against discrimination within

⁷⁵ Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 117.

⁷⁶ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 200-201, 272-273, 303-304, 310-319, 360-363, 373-374; Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 97-124; Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*; and *Rocky Mountain News*, December 6, 1984.

the war against poverty.”⁷⁷ Indeed, polls suggested that most African Americans prioritized better job and wage opportunities over access to public accommodations.⁷⁸

Although downplayed by media coverage and even some of its own organizers, the March on Washington the previous summer had been one for “jobs and freedom.” Speaker after speaker unleashed an ever sharper economic critique. A. Philip Randolph, who had dreamed of such a gathering for a generation, questioned the value of public accommodations access and even the FEPC if automation “continued to destroy the jobs of millions of workers.”⁷⁹ Although the AFL-CIO predictably chose not to endorse the march, thousands of workers from more progressive unions came in force. The UAW’s Walter Reuther, whose organization was a major financial backer of the march, linked housing, public accommodations, and education to African Americans’ “second-class economic” citizenship. And SNCC’s John Lewis, whose speech garnered the largest ovation other than King’s, painted a portrait of black life in Mississippi not through voting rights or segregated lunch counters, but through the pitiful daily wage of sharecroppers and their lack of economic security.⁸⁰

Throughout 1964 and 1965, King became increasingly engaged in how to address economic justice even as he campaigned for passage of the Civil Rights Act, Johnson’s re-election, and an effective Voting Rights Act. Yet this heightened engagement was often in

⁷⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 161.

⁷⁸ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 160-162; and Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 170, 193.

⁷⁹ *New York Times*, August 29, 1963.

⁸⁰ *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, August 29, 1963; and Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 178-180, 189-190.

response to others. *Why We Can't Wait*, published in June 1964, became what one scholar calls a “searing indictment of economic racism.”⁸¹ But this happened only after Johnson’s declaration of the War on Poverty persuaded black leaders like A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin that an interracial movement for full employment could happen. As a result, King’s advisors strongly recommended that the book incorporate a class agenda, without losing its moral tone. Uprisings in Harlem and Rochester, New York, a month later again challenged King to respond to black circumstances not directly connected with southern-style Jim Crow. And the rhetoric of Malcolm X, who called for “better food, clothing, housing, education, and jobs right *now*,” also pressured King to act on economic issues in the North as well as the South.⁸² For the rest of the year, he stressed socioeconomic change, full employment, an elimination of slums, and the promise of the War on Poverty – including at his acceptance speech for the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize.⁸³

Other movement activists who dreamed of a full employment program saw at its center a muscular black-labor alliance – one more class-based in nature that even included Puerto Ricans and ethnic Mexicans. In late 1964 and early 1965, SNCC and CORE became the first black civil rights organizations to endorse farmworker strikes against grape growers in California. Initially prompted by SNCC members and sympathizers in the San Francisco area, the alliance emerged from a belief that the National Farm Workers Association was as

⁸¹ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 198.

⁸² Malcolm X, “A Declaration of Independence,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder, 1965; 1989), 20, emphasis original.

⁸³ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 198-203, 208-211, 214-216; and King, *Why We Can't Wait*.

much of a movement as it was a union. Recalled SNCC activist Terry Cannon: “The core of the connection [between SNCC and the NFWA] was the similarity in treatment of blacks in the South and Latinos in the West and Southwest.”⁸⁴ By the middle of 1965, SNCC began providing valuable support in non-violent education and material supplies, including radios and a car or two. Meanwhile, Cleveland Robinson, a black trade unionist with the New York local of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU), invited King to join an organizing drive of 4,000 mostly black and Puerto Rican department store workers in the summer of 1965. King had earlier lent his support to striking black and Puerto Rican hospital workers in New York and had ever since called Local 1199 of the Hospital and Nursing Home Employees “my favorite union.” Another confidante of King’s, L.D. Reddick also had pitched a more class-based vision, imploring King that African Americans must join “all the disadvantaged ... the American Indian, the Puerto Rican, the Mexican and the Oriental.”⁸⁵

King declined both Reddick’s and Robinson’s invitations, and while he may have known about the grape strikers, King remained detached from their organizing. This stemmed at least in part from his continued skepticism of organized labor, fueled by the AFL-CIO’s anti-communist aversion to fight racial injustice or deep-seated poverty in any genuine way. This led to King’s unwillingness to involve himself in grassroots organizing drives, and a belief that other organizations and means proved more effective. Highly

⁸⁴ Araiza, “For the Freedom of Other Men,” 28.

⁸⁵ Quote in L.D. Reddick letter to King, June 19, 1964, Box 20, Folder 5, KP. Also, Araiza, “For the Freedom of Other Men,” 17-42; Maria Varela, SNCC and Chicano activist, interview by author, June 18, 2005, Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 230-232.

conscious of the media's positive role in making the violence of Selma and Birmingham a national story, King told Stanley Levison that organizing southern laundry workers simply did not produce the kind of news coverage he and his organization needed. The same could go for the United Farm Workers, which, in 1965, appeared little more than another desperate effort by farm laborers to receive better wages and conditions. But one unintended consequence of rejecting organized labor as an organizing model or vanguard was the lost opportunity to work with ethnic Mexicans or other Spanish-speaking peoples earlier.⁸⁶

Rather than pursue closer ties to labor, King chose higher-profile, less workplace-based events in which to address economic justice. While Cleveland Robinson sought King's help in an RWDSU election in a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Selma, King was in Los Angeles trying to make sense of the Watts rebellion. Certainly aware of the violent potential of simmering anger in the nation's cities, King believed that Watts was mainly "an economic conflict between the haves and have-nots" and could be alleviated through greater funds and local control of the anti-poverty board, and a civilian police review panel.⁸⁷ He also preached about the effectiveness of nonviolent strategy to a clearly skeptical audience, some of whom believed that fire had won the day. Indeed, ethnic Mexicans, most of whom steered clear of the rebellion despite similar grievances, perceived a positive government response to the

⁸⁶ Corona with García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 215; and Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

⁸⁷ Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 299.

conflagration in the form of anti-poverty programming for African Americans. While it may have prompted more conversations between blacks and ethnic Mexicans, as Gerald Horne suggests, Watts certainly demonstrated a more assertive alternative for Chicano activism in the years to come. The Mexican American Political Association chose not to weigh in on the rebellion. But other outraged ethnic Mexicans responded to the shooting deaths of three ethnic Mexicans during Watts – as well as the bump in anti-poverty funds for blacks – by looking for new local organizations, such as the Young Citizens for Community Action, the predecessor of the Brown Berets. For King, it strengthened his resolve to take his organization north to tackle the problems of a Northern ghetto – a move he made over the protests of most of his aides. And he took on what the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights had called “the most residentially segregated city” in America: Chicago.⁸⁸

* * *

King did not “bring the movement North,” as is the popular conception of the Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM), nor did he leave the city’s freedom struggle in a permanent shambles, as many historians argue.⁸⁹ Instead, he came to Chicago at the

⁸⁸ Quote in Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 80. Also, Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 230; *Los Angeles Times*, August 19-21, 1965; Horne, *Fire This Time*, 182-184, 298-299; Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero! Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 40; and Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*, 69-73.

⁸⁹ Quote in Jeanne Theoharis, “Introduction,” in *Freedom North*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 4 – a volume dedicated to critiquing this notion. While early studies of the Chicago Freedom Movement by Anderson and Pickering, Garrow, and Fairclough suggest a more straightforward failure, later scholarship generally argues that CFM had some long-term benefits. Peter Ling and Nick Kotz, both writing more recently, echo the earlier generation. Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 3; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 569-570; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 306-307; Ling, *Martin*

invitation of Al Raby, director of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO), and built on the city's already energetic movement led by CCCO, the African American-dominated United Packinghouse Workers, the Saul Alinsky-inspired Woodlawn Organization, and a myriad of other community groups. In the early 1960s, a fragile coalition of mostly blacks and whites, with a few ethnic Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, had formed to challenge the power of Mayor Richard J. Daley, particularly the policies of Daley's school superintendent, Benjamin Willis. Few cities in the nation were more balkanized than the Chicago of the 1960s, where Daley's Democratic machine deftly manipulated representatives of ethnic minorities to either fall in line with City Hall, accepting patronage perks along the way, or face brutal marginalization. As a result, blacks on Chicago's South Side had been sending African American Democrats to Congress and the City Council since the 1930s – yet witnessed little substantive change in the deplorable conditions of the majority-black South Side or the even poorer predominantly black and Latino West Side. By the eve of the 1960s, Chicago's reputation as a promise land for African Americans had waned. But relative to the Deep South, the city still offered better jobs and income for blacks, who continued to migrate north in the hopes of something better.⁹⁰

Luther King Jr., 239-240; Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 362-367; Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 558; Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 220-235; and Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 298-299. In addition, participants of a fortieth anniversary conference on CFM, including Jesse Jackson, concluded in July 2006 that SCLC's campaign achieved some success.

⁹⁰ Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 9-14; and Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 44-68. An influential black Republican operation had emerged in the 1920s, headed by Oscar DePriest, who went to Congress in 1928 – the first African American to do so since North Carolina's George White in 1902. Republicans began to lose their grip on the black vote in Chicago, as with the rest of the nation, because of the Depression.

In 1961, impatience over persistently poor conditions in the city's black communities, especially its woefully crowded schools, boiled over. While white students attended often under-utilized facilities, an ever-growing population of blacks and Latinos struggled to receive quality education in schools using double shifts. Benjamin Willis and the city's board of education claimed that such measures were necessary and any disparities reflected so-called *de facto* residential segregation. Of course, African Americans knew that state-sanctioned housing discrimination had helped create such segregation, and that school board policies aimed to perpetuate it. Thus, in the summer of 1961, the local NAACP sued the school board over its discriminatory policies to deny transfers to black students. Less than a year later, both middle and working class African Americans staged sit-ins and other protests in neighborhoods such as Vernon Park, Woodlawn, and North Lawndale. CCCO emerged out of these demonstrations, as a variety of organizations ranging from the NAACP and Chicago Urban League to local Parent-Teacher Associations sought to pool their resources and fight for quality education.⁹¹

During the next few years, the Chicago movement became particularly vibrant as organizations across the city launched campaigns to better living conditions for African Americans. Some called for opening more jobs to African Americans, fighting housing discrimination, even challenging prejudice within Roman Catholic institutions. The Students for a Democratic Society made Chicago one of its target cities for the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), in which it aimed to organize poor whites, Puerto Ricans, and

⁹¹ Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 15-18; Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 84-102; and Dionne Danna, *Something Better for Our Children: Black Organizing in Chicago Public Schools, 1963-1971* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 25-27.

American Indians in the Uptown community “to protest the inadequacies of social and economic life which we face every day,” from jobs and welfare to exorbitant rents and the lack of playgrounds.⁹² And despite the decline of union influence due to de-industrialization and anti-communist politics, Chicago remained a stronghold for activist labor unions, particularly the United Packinghouse Workers and the United Steel Workers. But quality education remained the number one issue. After city officials accepted and then rejected Willis’ resignation, 225,000 students boycotted school in October 1963, another 175,000 in February 1964, and during the next eighteen months, thousands of marchers led by CCCO and Al Raby periodically tied up schools and downtown streets in an attempt to sway Daley and the powers that be to take their concerns seriously. It was these activities – combined with other cities’ lack of enthusiasm for an SCLC campaign – that persuaded Martin Luther King Jr. of Chicago’s potential to respond to nonviolence positively and prevent another Watts. “Chicago is a symbol of de facto desegregation,” King declared during an initial visit there. “I feel there is a very critical situation here that could grow more serious and ominous unless the city’s leaders are eternally vigilant.”⁹³

As it turned out, that risk was quite real, as Chicago saw its share of uprisings during the next several summers, the largest coming after King’s assassination in 1968. But the

⁹² Jobs or Income Now Community (JOIN) Union, “Statement on Urban Progress Centers,” February 12, 1965, 4, in Box 25, Folder 1, Papers of George A. Wiley, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison (hereafter known as WILEY). See also Jennifer Frost, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor: Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 54-57, 151-153.

⁹³ Quote in *New York Times*, July 25, 1965. Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 19-33, 70-71; Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 105-156; and Danna, *Something Better for Our Children*, 27-55.

city's potential to embrace nonviolent strategy, in the forms demonstrated in Birmingham and Selma, was not as real, as many of King's aides feared. Whether or not SCLC intervention only prolonged the slow collapse of CCCO as a viable organization and the city's freedom struggle in general, his Chicago experience also proved King wrong about the level of prejudice held by working class whites in the North, as well as the wiliness of Richard Daley and the strength of his political machine. Other scholars have offered exhaustive detail about the Chicago Freedom Movement.⁹⁴ But it remains important to note that, at each step, King and his aides seemed taken aback by the sheer intensity of white ethnic hostility to calls for open housing. "I have never in my life seen such hate," King said. "Not in Mississippi or Alabama."⁹⁵ They were also surprised by the sophistication of the Daley machine in mobilizing black opposition to King's presence and local activists' ferocious accusations of being a "sellout" at the eventual settlement King and CFM negotiators made with Daley and the real estate industry. The so-called Summit Agreement ended freedom marches in residential areas in exchange for a vague set of official promises to combat housing discrimination and the establishment of an organization, the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities (LCMOC), to monitor fair housing progress. SCLC allies on the poorer West Side condemned the settlement. Labor and community activist Timuel Black called the agreement "the most unkind cut of all," adding that, "With

⁹⁴ For the best narratives, see Ralph, *Northern Protest*; and Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 150-340. For early narratives by participants, see *Chicago 1966: Open Housing Marches, Summit Negotiations, and Operation Breadbasket*, ed. David Garrow (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989).

⁹⁵ *Jet*, August 25, 1966.

his Negro and white Judas Iscariots the Mayor had taken on the great Dr. Martin Luther King and ... won.”⁹⁶ The feelings of betrayal proved widely held, especially as city officials backed away from almost every point of the agreement in the following months.⁹⁷

Yet the Chicago movement did offer a few tangible results, one being the new fair housing organization, LCMOC, which proved influential for several decades. Another lesser known achievement was planting the more immediate roots of the Poor People’s Campaign. In the broadest fashion, “the Chicago riot,” as historian Thomas Jackson argues, “was a turning point in King’s radicalization.”⁹⁸ For three days in July 1966, Chicago police officers battled African Americans on the West Side, leaving two blacks dead and many more injured after shutting off a fire hydrant in hot weather and prompting a revolt. On the last day of the uprising, young black men – many of them gang members – met with King and Andrew Young and talked of fleeting job opportunities, and it dawned on the preachers that the solution to ghetto misery was empowerment in any way possible. “A lot of people have lost faith in the establishment,” King said. “They’ve lost faith in the democratic process.”⁹⁹ Yet King and Young persuaded these men to try nonviolence and many of them two years later formed the core of the Chicago contingent to the Poor People’s Campaign, joining more seasoned activists such as Chester Robinson and Bill Darden of the West Side Organization

⁹⁶ Timuel D. Black letter to King, April 3, 1967, in Box 5, Folder 32, KP. Black was president of the Chicago Chapter of the Negro American Labor Council.

⁹⁷ Thomas G. Ayers, “The ‘Summit Agreement’: Report of the Subcommittee to the Conference on Fair Housing Convened by the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race,” in *Chicago 1966*, ed. Garrow, 147-154.

⁹⁸ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 287.

⁹⁹ King, “I Need Victories,” Chicago, July 12, 1966, Box 11, Speeches, KP.

tenant union in recruitment and eventually security. Men like Billy Hollins, who had been sleeping in his car with little direction, found their calling in the Chicago Freedom Movement; Hollins remained in SCLC for years. And Bernard Lafayette, the PPC's eventual national director, gained the trust of SCLC officials by helping coordinate the Chicago crusade on the ground.¹⁰⁰

The Chicago campaign also represented the first time that SCLC contemplated reaching out to a larger Latino community beyond the narrow confines of New York's multiethnic Local 1199. Chicago's industries had attracted thousands of mostly ethnic Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1940s. While some lived in majority-white areas such as Uptown, Lincoln Park, and South Chicago, both ethnic groups faced similar constraints to African Americans in housing options. By the late 1950s, neighborhoods in which Puerto Ricans and ethnic Mexicans were the majority had emerged – culturally vibrant but highly segregated from much of the city's wealth and quality schools. As a result, Latinos had formed social and political organizations such as Los Caballeros de San Juan and even had participated in some of the earlier school boycotts across the city. King aide James Bevel reported that SCLC had begun to reach out to the city's Spanish-speaking leaders, several of whom committed to CFM. But while King focused on the predominantly black communities of North Lawndale and West and East Garfield Parks on the West Side, documents suggest that little actual outreach

¹⁰⁰ *New York Times*, July 14, 1966; *Chicago Defender*, July 14, 1967; Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 109-113, 220-235; Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 410; James McGraw, "An Interview with Andrew J. Young," *Christianity and Crisis* 27 (January 1968): 324-330; and Billy Hollins, interview by author, October 9, 2006, Atlanta, Georgia.

occurred in neighboring and predominantly Latino communities of Humboldt Park and Little Village. Obed Lopez Zacarías, a native ethnic Mexican and activist with the Chicago chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, recalled handing out fliers for King’s rally at Soldier Field and periodically hearing him speak in the summers of 1965 and 1966. But although inspirational, Lopez said, King did not speak directly to Latino concerns.¹⁰¹

This disconnect reinforced what Puerto Ricans in Chicago already believed – that their community was virtually invisible to city officials. While African Americans received their share of attention, through the Daley machine, the Chicago Freedom Movement, and the urban uprisings, Puerto Rican concerns over rent, education, and police brutality went unanswered. Therefore, younger Puerto Ricans in particular were not surprised when police officers shot 20-year-old Cruz Arcelis on June 12, 1966, and sparked three days of rioting in the Division Street area. Lopez and at least two dark-skinned Puerto Ricans he knew from the Chicago Freedom Movement turned their attention to their own community, but not before Lopez asked James Bevel and SCLC organizers to come observe a “social

¹⁰¹ Felix M. Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 125-144; Maura I. Toro-Morn, “Boricuas en Chicago: Gender and Class in the Migration and Settlement of Puerto Ricans,” in *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vázquez-Hernández (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 128-150; Louise Año Nuevo de Kerr, “Chicano Settlements in Chicago: A Brief History,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 2 (1975): 22-32, and “Mexican Chicago: Chicano Assimilation Aborted, 1939-1954,” in *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest*, ed. Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’Alroy Jones (Grand Rapid, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 293-328; Obed Lopez Zacarías, interview by author, September 11, 2006, by telephone; James Bevel, “SCLC – Chicago Project,” November 8, 1965, in Box 150, Folder 22, SCLC; and *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 16, 1966.

phenomenon.”¹⁰² Taking a cue from their CFM counterparts, hundreds of Puerto Ricans marched five miles to city hall a few days later and made formal demands about police brutality and a general lack of services in their neighborhoods. In addition, Puerto Ricans and ethnic Mexicans formed the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO) and the Spanish Action Committee of Chicago as explicitly political organizations willing to use direct action protest to better the community. Both groups also came under immediate scrutiny from the Chicago Police Department’s Red Squad, although Lopez proudly claims that it never infiltrated LADO. In rather indirect ways then, CFM provided a context and model for Puerto Ricans who found their own voice. The Poor People’s Campaign offered a similar opportunity two years later.¹⁰³

Perhaps CFM’s most lasting and most economically driven enterprise, however, was Operation Breadbasket under the leadership of a young Jesse Jackson. Tapping into a long tradition of African American selective buying campaigns going back generations in Chicago and New York, the Reverend Leon Sullivan of Zion Baptist Church prompted a new wave of such organizing in Philadelphia in 1959 and boasted that it had created 2,000 “breakthrough” jobs by boycotting businesses that did not hire and promote African Americans. In 1962, SCLC started a similar campaign dubbed Operation Breadbasket in

¹⁰² Obed Lopez Zacarías, in Mervin Méndez, “A Community Fights Back: Recollections of The 1966 Division Street Riot,” *Diálogo 2* (1998), http://condor.depaul.edu/~dialogo/back_issues/issue_2/issue_2_index.htm, accessed August 29, 2005.

¹⁰³ Obed Lopez Zacarías, interview by author; Méndez, “A Community Fights Back: Recollections of The 1966 Division Street Riot”; and Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago*, 144-179, and *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago* (South Bend: Notre Dame Press, 1985), 48-54. Remarkably, none of the literature on CFM even mentions the Division Street riot.

Atlanta, which produced an estimated 5,000 new jobs for blacks in a five-year span.

Persuaded by Jackson that Breadbasket could involve Chicago's black ministers in a way that supported CFM goals but avoided their participation in mass street action – and thus, the fury of Richard Daley – King in January 1966 announced the formation of a Chicago chapter.¹⁰⁴

During the next year, as SCLC and CCCO officials organized open housing marches, a small group of ministers including Jackson and fellow seminarians Gary Massoni, David Wallace, and Calvin Morris spearheaded campaigns against several businesses serving the inner city but notorious for hiring few if any blacks. Following a procedure of information-gathering, public education, negotiation, and then direct action, if necessary, Breadbasket received assurances for more aggressive minority hiring from a range of businesses with local and regional headquarters there – including Borden, Country's Delight, and Hawthorn-Mellody dairies, Jewel, Hi-Lo, and National Tea groceries, and soft drink giant Pepsi. Sometimes company officials only agreed after scores of people picketed their stores – a harbinger of the successful grape boycotts of 1967-1968 in Chicago and elsewhere. But quickly, business officials learned to make promises to avoid demonstrations. Looking back, Massoni considered the early victories of 1966 and 1967 as “more genuine and successful”

¹⁰⁴ Gary Massoni, “Perspectives on Operation Breadbasket,” in *Chicago 1966*, ed. Garrow, 192-195; Leon Sullivan, *Build, Brother, Build* (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith, 1969); and Calvin Morris, interview by author, July 24, 2006, Chicago, Illinois. Morris remembers as a teenager in Philadelphia giving up Tastykake, his favorite snack, to honor Sullivan's boycott. For more on Sullivan's selective patronage organizing and its eventual transition into self-help, see Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 83-86, 101-119.

than later ones, because the organization had a consistent follow-up mechanism in place.¹⁰⁵ Not unlike in Birmingham and later in the Summit Agreement, the risk of broken promises remained high. At least one business, Hi-Lo, went bankrupt before complying with its hiring assurances. But while cynicism set in among activists over King's settlement with Richard Daley, Breadbasket made a real difference and became a solid foundation for future SCLC ventures in and out of Chicago. Despite his troubles there, King concluded that Chicago remained a key financial and personal stronghold for mobilizing and organizing what would be his last crusade.¹⁰⁶

King's organization and his local allies maintained the Chicago Freedom Movement into the spring of 1967, but it had become clear far earlier that the summit agreement with Richard Daley had accomplished little. While more recent analysis suggests that the movement helped lay the groundwork for incremental gains in fair housing and economic opportunities through efforts such as Operation Breadbasket, white elites, media observers, and not a few movement activists condemned the Chicago incursion as an abject failure. As a consequence, many predicted King's demise as an influential national figure in 1967. And during the coming months, King's emergence as a vocal critic of the Vietnam War just compounded this impression.

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¹⁰⁵ Gary Massoni, interview by author, September 5, 2007, by telephone.

¹⁰⁶ Massoni, "Perspectives on Operation Breadbasket," in *Chicago 1966*, ed. Garrow, 192-193, 197-211; and Calvin Morris and Gary Massoni, interviews by author.

It is with some irony that in 1967 – a generation after it began – the Cold War brought King and other activists of the freedom struggle closer to a style of interethnic organizing not seen since the 1940s. Rather than drive African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and whites apart, the progressively more unpopular Vietnam War spawned new coalitions of people not only opposed to the war, but also outraged by its deleterious effect on the larger freedom struggle and the War on Poverty. Undoubtedly, black and white peace activists often saw things differently, as demonstrated by racially segregated marches and other conflicts over tactics in the late 1960s. Yet peace activism also brought many people together. For instance, friends and family of Corky Gonzales recalled how peace marches brought Chicano, Black Power, and New Left activists together in Denver. After Craig Hart began attending those rallies, the Catholic priest of Mexican and Indian descent became the unofficial chaplain for Gonzales’s Chicano organization, the Crusade for Justice. Local Black Panther chief Lauren Watson became acquainted with Gonzales during such marches, as did white leaders from the local chapter of the American Friends Service Committee. Declared Gonzales at an August 1966 rally, “The ruthless financial lords of Wall Street are the only recipients of the tremendous profits to be made by the conduct of a wanton, ruthless war.”¹⁰⁷ To all of these individuals, the war could not be separated from the larger struggle for economic justice.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ernesto Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice: Chicano Militancy and the Government’s War on Dissent* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1999), 28.

¹⁰⁸ Craig Hart, interview by author, November 29, 2007, and Lauren Watson, interview by author, June 26, 2005, both in Denver, Colo.; *Denver Post*, August 20, 1967; Lorena Oropeza, *¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 89, 127, 130, 148; and Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 27-29.

By early 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. had come to the same conclusion. King and SCLC had been on record against the war since 1965, calling for a negotiated settlement soon after the bombing of North Vietnam commenced. Citing his commission as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, King believed it was his duty to call for international peace, as did top aides such as Ralph Abernathy. But by late 1965, King backed down from his most strident critiques of the war as the SCLC board grew squeamish amid increasing criticism on the issue. Only after a year of lackluster War on Poverty funding, an organizing setback in Chicago, and his exposure to disturbing images of disfigured Vietnamese children did King decide to vocalize his opposition more prominently.¹⁰⁹

In February and March of 1967, King participated in his first anti-war marches in Chicago and Los Angeles, neither of which caused much concern or extensive press coverage. But his speech at New York City's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 – exactly one year before his death – proved quite different. King had taken his nervous advisors' counsel and agreed to speak to the respectable anti-war group Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam in order to neutralize his potentially risky presence at the upcoming and much larger Spring Mobilization Against the War in New York City.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ *New York Times*, July 5 and August 13, 1965; Ralph Abernathy, "Vietnam and the Negro Revolution," November 1, 1966, Box 59, Folder 19, SCLC; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 334; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 543.

¹¹⁰ King's advisors, particularly Stanley Levison, were afraid that King would be seen walking side-by-side with known Communists, anarchists, and other anti-war protesters at the "Spring Mobe," which was open to anyone who wanted to attend. The April 15 protest proved to be the largest anti-war rally to date, attracting nearly 250,000 people. While Stokely Carmichael and other activists carried Viet Cong flags, King joined more "respectable" participants Benjamin Spock, Harry Belafonte, and James Bevel, avoiding the worst of SCLC fears. *New York Times*, April 16, 1967; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 340; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 556-557.

Instead, King's speech represented his most blistering attack on war policy to date. Rather than make vague links between cuts in War on Poverty programs and the war effort, or ground a peace message in a philosophical pacifism, King proved more combative – directly criticizing the Johnson administration, speaking rhetorically from the perspective of a Vietnamese peasant, and consistently linking the peace movement with the larger struggle for freedom. Speaking of the angry urban rioters with which he had engaged during the previous summers, he repeated a question they had posed to him:

But they asked – and rightly so – what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government.¹¹¹

He told the crowd of more than 3,000 that he could not stay silent about the war any longer, and that they should not either.¹¹²

The directness of the speech left King in good spirits, even if it meant a potential decline in SCLC fundraising from white liberals and institutions such as the Ford Foundation. He anticipated criticism from the Johnson administration; one aide told the president that the “stupid” and “inordinately ambitious” King had “thrown in with the

¹¹¹ King, “A Time to Break Silence,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 233.

¹¹² King, “The Casualties of the War in Vietnam,” February 25, 1967, untitled address to peace march, March 25, 1967, and “Beyond Vietnam,” April 4, 1967, all in Box 12, Speeches, KP; *New York Times*, February 11 and April 14, 1966, February 26 and March 26 and 31, 1967; *Los Angeles Times*, July 3 and August 22, 1965 and February 26, 1967; and *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1967.

commies.”¹¹³ But what he did not expect were the virulent attacks on him by the many liberals not ready to cut ties with the White House and uncomfortable with his calls for draft resistance. Nearly every major newspaper, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, severely criticized his logic and understanding of the issues. Calling some of his statements “sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy,” the *Post* declared that King “has done a grave injury to those who are his natural allies” and “even graver injury to himself.”¹¹⁴ Although King expected the national offices of the NAACP and Urban League to distance themselves from his statements, he found criticism by fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche and long-time advisor and pacifist Bayard Rustin more disconcerting. Both publicly counseled that the civil rights and peace movements should remain separate. “In my view, Dr. King should positively and publicly give up one role or the other,” Bunche said. “The two efforts have too little in common.”¹¹⁵ Black columnist Carl Rowan, apparently encouraged by the White House, delved into King’s relationship with Levison, and later in the year published a piece calling King a communist “dupe.”¹¹⁶ It was clear the most vocal

¹¹³ John Roche memo to President Johnson, April 5, 1967, in Box 147, Confidential Name File “KI,” Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter known as LBJ).

¹¹⁴ *Washington Post*, April 6, 1967.

¹¹⁵ *New York Times*, April 14, 1967. Bunche privately told King later that he was in full agreement with the pastor’s analysis of Vietnam, but that he could not say so in public. King dropped his criticism of Bunche, but expressed frustration to Levison over Bunche’s unwillingness to risk his standing on principle. King and Levison, telephone conversation, April 14, 1967, Levison FBI file, part 12b, FBI online reading room, <http://foia.fbi.gov/levison/levison12b.pdf>, accessed August 28, 2006.

¹¹⁶ *New York Times*, April 6 and 14, 1967; *New York Amsterdam News*, April 15 and 22, 1967; *New (Pittsburgh) Courier*, April 15, 1967; and Carl Rowan, “Martin Luther King’s Tragic Decision,” *Reader’s Digest*, September 1967.

critics had either close ties to the Johnson administration, or, in the case of Bayard Rustin, held out hope that the White House would rededicate itself to the cause of black civil rights.

King was not universally criticized, however, as he gained a substantial amount of credibility among peace and student activists, not to mention at least some grudging respect from Black Power advocates and others who had over the years sarcastically called him “de Lawd” for his paternalism. Together with a sprinkling of “dove” senators, these war critics applauded King’s sharp critique of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Letters of support flooded into SCLC offices and mainstream newsrooms, while other national leaders such as Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality welcomed King’s new message: “Dr. King has come around and I’m glad to have him with us, no question about that.”¹¹⁷ King’s stance on the war also overjoyed Stokely Carmichael, who believed the SCLC president would have arrived at the position eventually. “You know, the statement was, ‘We’re going to beat them with nonviolence and love,’ ” he said, speaking of King’s larger message. “It was clear that his philosophy made it impossible for him not to take a stand against the war in Vietnam.”¹¹⁸ Other activists, such as Marian Wright and Michael Harrington, were also supportive. “The prophet has moved out of the back of the bus,” declared Harrington in a *Washington Post* opinion piece. “... Dr. King obviously could not take the advice to segregate his moral

¹¹⁷ *New York Times*, April 6, 1967.

¹¹⁸ Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 340.

principles to one question.”¹¹⁹ With such encouragement, King talked of launching a “Vietnam Summer.”¹²⁰

A summer dedicated to ending the Vietnam War did not come to pass, as urban uprisings flared again in June and July of 1967 and captured King’s attention. But unlike a year earlier, King did not quiet his criticism of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It remained central to his thinking about how to quell violence in the cities, address the rising expectations and subsequent frustrations of many African Americans – especially young, unemployed black men – and reinvigorate the nation’s War on Poverty. As he considered launching a new campaign for all poor people, King contemplated the impact of the war on the most impoverished Americans – through depleted federal budgets and underfunded programs, soldiers’ lost or maimed lives, and a society facing an unquantifiable but apparent moral decay. Ironically, the Vietnam War offered an opportunity for interethnic collaboration to come full circle. While the emergence of the Cold War destroyed nascent attempts at interethnic organizing in the 1940s and 1950s, one of anti-communism’s greatest excesses opened the door again. And Martin Luther King Jr., armed with an ever-more sophisticated analysis of race, class, and poverty, stepped right through.

¹¹⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1967.

¹²⁰ *New York Times*, April 24, 1967. Other examples of written support include Marian Wright letter to King, May 4, 1967, Box 5, Folder 35; Alfred Hassler (Fellowship of Reconciliation) letter to King, April 10, 1967, Box 2, Folder 14; and Robert Bird (AFSC) letter to King, April 21, 1967, Box 2, Folder 14, all in SCLC.

Chapter Two

The Road to Washington: Poverty, Peace and SCLC's Challenge

"You know, Dr. King, if you don't know ... you should say you don't know."

- Johnnie Tillmon, chairwoman of the National Welfare Rights Organization¹

On December 4, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. formally announced his organization's much anticipated – and, in some quarters, feared – program of mass civil disobedience for the upcoming election year. Originally called the Washington Spring Project, what became known as the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) aimed to dramatize poverty in the United States, by leading "waves of the nation's poor and disinherited to Washington, D.C. ... to secure at least jobs or income for all," King stated. During the following spring, "we will be petitioning our government for specific reforms and we intend to build militant nonviolent actions that government moves against poverty."² At the heart of the plan was King's notion of "militant nonviolence," illustrated through a series of planned marches, rallies, demonstrations, and sit-ins designed to tie up federal agencies and Congress – all emanating from a central, semi-permanent campout of poor people on the Washington Mall.³ If such

¹ Tim Sampson, one-time NWRO associate director, interview by Nick Kotz, December 8, 1974, Box 25, Nick Kotz Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter known as KOTZ).

² Martin Luther King Jr., press conference transcript announcing Poor People's Campaign, December 4, 1967, MLKPP.

³ Although there had been extensive behind-the-scenes discussions among SCLC officials about the use of a central encampment to help dramatize poverty and coordinate action, King gave few such

“massive dislocation” failed to move decision-makers in Washington, then demonstrators would take their protests home to cities and smaller communities across the country, as well as to the two major party political conventions in Miami Beach and Chicago in the summer of 1968. One way or another, King promised, the poor would be acknowledged in the richest nation in the world.

King’s vision of an “army of the poor” was ambitious, to say the least. Other activists such as Chicano movement leader Reies López Tijerina, had envisioned and pursued parallel efforts to reach across the seemingly impenetrable ethnic, racial, and cultural lines that so often divided the country’s poorest. But King’s proposal surpassed these actions in both scope and potential, by envisioning the transformation of an already-evolving black freedom struggle into a genuine movement of, by, and for poor people. Whether the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was equipped to handle such a daunting task remained an open question. Undoubtedly, SCLC, even in late 1967, boasted two key advantages: an unparalleled access to financial resources, particularly through organizations such as the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, and the continued rhetorical star power of King and aides such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson. Even after the withering criticism of his actions in Chicago and his position against the Vietnam War, King’s articulation of a new campaign against poverty garnered wide attention, if not cautious admiration.

But just as SCLC challenged the country to address poverty, the preparation for the Poor People’s Campaign challenged SCLC in a fundamental way. Much has been written

details during this press conference. In response to a reporter’s question, he suggested that demonstrators might pitch tents in different parts of the city. King, press conference transcript announcing PPC, December 4, 1967, MLKPP; and *New York Times*, December 5, 1967.

about SCLC's general lack of practical organization and communication, especially in regard to the day-to-day conduct of the Poor People's Campaign.⁴ Mobilizing thousands of people into a multiethnic alliance, while balancing the competing interests, objectives, and rhetoric of several movements would have proved challenging to any organization. But such an effort particularly exposed the stark limitations of SCLC's organizing and leadership model. This chapter will explore the months of preparation for the Poor People's Campaign, and demonstrate that historians have overemphasized SCLC disorganization. Rather, SCLC's reliance on charismatic paternalism, a top-down style which often saw women and non-black minorities in particular as junior partners, often left the organization less than fully-equipped to ameliorate the tensions inherent to such a grand coalition. Only when King himself intervened, by convening a historic multiethnic gathering of community leaders, did the campaign begin to break new ground. During the Minority Group Conference, held in Atlanta on March 14, 1968, the campaign's grand potential to build a class-based alliance could be seen for the first time. Yet, what put those individuals in the room together, more than anything else, was King. After King's assassination in Memphis, interest in the campaign took on even greater heights – yet ones SCLC hardly could control. Thus, paradoxically, King and his organization appeared to be both ideal and deeply flawed stewards of a new national alliance of poor people in opposition to the economic, social, and political power structure.

⁴ For instance, see Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 141; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 386-388; Ling, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, 298-301; T. Kahn, "Why the Poor People's Campaign Failed," *Commentary* 46 (September 1968): 50-55; and "Mini-city That Failed," *Christianity Today* 12 (July 19, 1968): 35. Contemporary newspaper accounts often drove this conclusion. For more, see Chapter Five.

* * *

King's December announcement was not unexpected. Rather, the program had been in the works publicly since a call for action during SCLC's annual convention in August, and privately well before that. Prompted by the devastating uprisings in Detroit and Newark, New Jersey, in which at least sixty-nine people were killed, King appealed to President Johnson and Congress to act.⁵ Disturbed but not surprised by the ferocity of these rebellions, King expected even worse violence in other American cities, including two where SCLC had been active, Chicago and Cleveland. To him, the violence stemmed directly from the lack of real jobs and opportunities in the inner cities. "There cannot be social peace when a people have awakened to their rights and dignity, and to the wretchedness of their lives simultaneously," he argued. "If our government cannot create jobs, it cannot govern. It cannot have white affluence amid black poverty and have racial harmony."⁶ But despite strong public support for federal action "to give jobs to all the unemployed" and "to tear down ghettos," a recalcitrant Congress showed less and less interest in urban spending – even for an inexpensive rat control program.⁷ That summer, King came to believe that a dramatic demonstration against poverty could best persuade the nation's political elites to embrace real economic reforms and investment in inner-city communities and break the

⁵ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 259; and Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 82-84.

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr. telegram to President Johnson, July 25, 1967, 3, Box 122, Folder 8, Part 3, Reel 4, frames 0002-0005, SCLC.

⁷ "The Racial Crisis: A Consensus," *Newsweek*, August 21, 1967, 15-18; and *Washington Post*, August 14, 1967.

cycle of violence. The fact that King chose to target the nation's elite – rather than leaders and activists in the communities – demonstrated the limitations of his strategic thinking and what could be interpreted as a paternalistic approach that privileged the state. This approach perhaps foreshadowed the difficulty SCLC eventually encountered in mobilization, goal-setting, and execution of the Poor People's Campaign.

But such calculations, at least for the moment, were overshadowed by the power of his rhetoric. In his speech to SCLC convention delegates, largely written by New York lawyer and controversial advisor Stanley Levison, King sharpened his critique of the country's economic structure and U.S. society's inability to address poverty in a substantive manner. Replacing what one historian calls his "rhetoric of hope" with a more hard-edged "rhetoric of power," King suggested a massive campaign of non-violent protest in Northern cities.⁸ Acknowledging the perceived power of violence to enact short-term gains, King argued that, "To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer-lasting, costly to the society, but not wantonly destructive. Mass civil disobedience can use rage as a constructive and creative force."⁹ But in his attempt to harness the anger simmering in the cities, King was leading the organization into uncharted territory.

King remained vague and perhaps even unconvinced that such "militant nonviolence" could work. The risks were great – violence, more conservative backlash,

⁸ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 572.

⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., "The Crisis in America's Cities: Address at the [Eleventh] Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," August 15, 1967, Box 13, Speeches, KP; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 569-570.

irrelevance – as several newspaper editorials dutifully pointed out in response. “(T)o paralyze a city’s economy and movement hardly sounds like the redemptive suffering Dr. King used to speak of,” stated King’s hometown paper, the *Atlanta Constitution*. “It sounds like a threat and an invitation to violence.” The *New York Times* echoed that concern, arguing that the result could very well be an even more conservative Congress and president in the near future: “Whether or not Dr. King goes ahead with his perilous project, its mere announcement will give added strength to the powerful Congressional elements already convinced that the answer to urban unrest lies in repression rather than in expanded programs for eradicating slum problems.” The *Chicago Tribune*’s editorial page, known for its hostility to civil rights causes over the years, all but declared King’s irrelevance. “The commander in the paper hat has waved the wooden sword. Who will follow him in the charge against Cemetery Ridge?”¹⁰ Meanwhile, inside the government, King’s statements sparked little public comment but considerable maneuvering behind the scenes, particularly by J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation, which continued to plot ways to undermine the civil rights leader. By the end of the year, King’s pronouncements landed him on the bureau’s “agitator index,” alongside the Black Panther Party, Nation of Islam, and other organizations deemed “militant,” and placed him at risk of renewed wiretapping.¹¹

¹⁰ *Atlanta Constitution*, *New York Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*, all August 17, 1967.

¹¹ Hoover had tried for years to destroy King, gathering data on the SCLC leader’s personal transgressions, his associations with former Communists (Stanley Levison and Harry Wachtel), and his increasingly radical stances on the war and capitalism. Eventually, the Poor People’s Campaign gave the bureau an opportunity to pursue its most extensive counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) against the freedom struggle to date – including massive surveillance, informants, and dirty tricks. In fact, this aspect has emerged as a dominant historiographical theme in the limited scholarship of the PPC. See McKnight, *The Last Crusade*; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 54-63.

To address his critics as well as his own qualms, King spent the next several months discussing the merits of a massive civil disobedience campaign with a variety of people, ranging from his inner circle to the editorial board of *Time* magazine. King had considered bringing poor people to Washington since at least October 1966 – when some 2,000 welfare rights activists staged a one-day Poor People’s March on the capital.¹² But it was Marian Wright, a young NAACP attorney and close confidante to King, who helped transform King’s vague notion into a concrete idea. As a board member of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), Wright appeared in March 1967 before the Senate Labor Committee’s subcommittee on poverty and challenged the senators to see the poverty and hunger in rural Mississippi for themselves. “(T)hey didn’t quite believe me when I talked about how the conditions of life, the poverty, was getting worse and the people really didn’t have enough to eat in Mississippi,” she recalled. “So they came, and [Senator] Bobby Kennedy came with them, and while they were there to examine the impact of the poverty program on Mississippi blacks and whites, I used it as an opportunity to tell them about

¹² Tom Offenburger, SCLC’s director of the Department of Information, 1967-1968, interview by Kay Shannon, July 2, 1968, Washington, D.C., in Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. (hereafter known as MSRC); “The Poor People’s March on Washington” and “Manual for Marchers,” [1966], Box 2101, Poor People’s March on Washington folder, unprocessed papers of the National Welfare Rights Organization (hereafter known as NWRO); and Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle over Welfare Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 53. Offenburger recalled a frustrated King musing aloud after addressing a group of “very cold and really uncomprehending” businessmen. “The only way to get the country to look at poverty was to get a large number of very poor people in the country to go to Washington, and possibly to some other large cities ... I can remember him talking about it -- he said, ‘We ought to come in mule carts, in old trucks, any kind of transportation people can get their hands on. People ought to come to Washington, sit down if necessary in the middle of the street and say, ‘We are here; we are poor; we don’t have any money; you have made us this way; you keep us down this way; and we’ve come to stay until you do something about it.’”

growing hunger in the Delta.”¹³ Kennedy, she claimed, was shocked by what he saw and later that summer suggested that Wright advise King, “Tell him to bring the poor people to Washington” because that would bring a “visible expression of the poor.”¹⁴ Wright did so at an SCLC retreat in September, adding her own twist by suggesting a fast and sit-in by King and a handful of poor people and civic leaders at the Department of Agriculture.¹⁵

While King embraced Wright’s suggestion, Stanley Levison proposed an even more ambitious crusade. Reaching back to the political organizing of the 1930s, Levison envisioned the spring campaign as an issue dramatization on the level of the Bonus Army March. In 1932, up to 6,000 World War I veterans descended upon Washington from across the country to demand an early release of their war bonuses. After being rebuffed by President Hoover and the U.S. Senate, marchers responded by setting up nine camps across the city to lobby the government and sway public opinion. Within weeks, the camps swelled to more than 20,000 veterans and their families, which spooked authorities concerned with threats of disorder. After a month, federal troops under General Douglas MacArthur tear-gassed and burned the camps, a heavy handedness that helped seal Hoover’s re-election defeat as well as legitimize the political strategy of marching on Washington. While the marchers did not receive their bonuses for another three years, Levison saw the event as an

¹³ Marian Wright Edelman in *Voices of Freedom*, ed. Hampton and Fayer, 452.

¹⁴ Marian Wright Edelman quote in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 453. See also Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 383; Dittmer, *Local People*, 373-374; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 578; and U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, *Examination of the War on Poverty, Part 2: Jackson, Miss.: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty*, 90th Cong., 1st sess., 1967, 642-658.

¹⁵ Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon.

ultimately successful model for affecting policy – and in the process gave birth to the idea of a tent city on the Mall.¹⁶

King also received encouragement of sorts from more unlikely sources. Soon after the Airlie retreat, King and Young were in New York City, where a young grassroots “NAACP militant” unexpectedly buoyed their spirits. Rather than reject nonviolence as an outdated strategy, as the media often portrayed many young African Americans as saying, this activist said that, “he was with nonviolence but we had not used nonviolence massively enough and disruptively enough in New York and in the North generally for its full impact to really be felt.”¹⁷ King perceived that even some journalists, despite the negative tone of most newspaper editorials, agreed that action needed to be taken to combat poverty. In addition to encouraging polls, the editors of *Time* expressed their deep concern over the problem of poverty. Although such sentiments did not translate into an explicit endorsement of massive civil disobedience in the nation’s capital, King apparently received the reinforcement he needed to move ahead with the campaign.¹⁸

Not everybody was in agreement, however, including in King’s inner circle. The most prominent internal critic was James Bevel, who, at the September retreat, made yet

¹⁶ Katherine Shannon, PPC staff member, interview by Claudia Rawles, August 12, 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC; McGraw, “An Interview with Andrew J. Young,” 327; and Lucy Barber, *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 89-106. See also Roger Daniels, *The Bonus March: An Episode of the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1971); and Donald Lisio, *The President and Protest: Hoover, MacArthur, and the Bonus Riot* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ McGraw, “An Interview with Andrew Young,” 327.

¹⁸ Andrew Young, interview by Kay Shannon, July 16, 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC; William Rutherford and Levison, telephone conversation, June 2, 1968, Levison FBI file, KP; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 578; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 358.

another impassioned plea to place opposition to the Vietnam War at the forefront of SCLC efforts. In the spring of 1967, Bevel had taken a leave of absence from SCLC in order to help organize the Spring Mobilization against the War in New York City, which he believed represented the future of the civil rights struggle. As “Mobe” organizers had hoped, Bevel persuaded King to raise his visibility in the anti-war movement. But despite staunch opposition to the war, most SCLC aides and board members recalled clearly the firestorm King’s raised profile created in the spring and remained skeptical of the wisdom of placing peace at the top of the new campaign’s agenda. King and others at the retreat also believed that a “stop the draft” movement, as Bevel had proposed, was simply impractical. At the time, more than four months before the public opinion-eroding Tet Offensive, most Americans, including journalists, still supported the war. King believed that the real momentum was for anti-poverty causes, especially on the heels of the violent uprisings of the previous summer. Yes, the war could be linked in any number of ways to the uprisings in American cities, as King, Stokely Carmichael, and other activists had done in their public statements. But poverty, SCLC officials determined, needed to be front and center; Vietnam could be addressed, as one aide suggested, through the “back door.” But the tensions that the war created among activists, especially in organized labor and the Democratic Party, only became worse over time and threatened to unravel the coalition SCLC struggled to put together.¹⁹

¹⁹ King, Levison, Young, and Abernathy, telephone conversation, January 19, 1967, Levison FBI file, KP; Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon, and Al Sampson, interview by Kay Shannon, July 8, 1968, Washington, D.C., both in MSRC; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 335. Gallup and Harris polls both suggested that a clear majority of Americans supported the war throughout 1967,

Although Bevel lost the argument, he remained a key aide to King, and a persistent critic of the campaign. And he was not alone. Other advisors remained skeptical of the PPC throughout the planning process. Hosea Williams, a blustery organizer most recently in Selma, wanted to see a renewed commitment to voter registration in the South – not just rhetorically, but with personnel and funds. He complained that the Selma office “consists of one person, the Director. . . . I couldn’t hardly get gas money down the street.”²⁰ Jesse Jackson, the director of SCLC’s Operation Breadbasket in Chicago and a rising star in the organization, saw his operation’s use of individual industry and business boycotts as the more productive method to create jobs for African Americans. A Washington campaign not only could distract from local affairs, Jackson argued, it also relies too much on the federal government.²¹ Bayard Rustin, longtime advisor to King, also saw the campaign as fraught with peril. Although in agreement with King on the nation’s economic needs, Rustin believed that coalitional politics, not protest, were the real “lessons of the long hot summer.”

ranging from a low of fifty-eight percent in late September to a high of seventy-one percent in February. These numbers began to shift markedly, however, after the Tet Offensive, a massive attack by North Vietnamese troops and allies in January 1968. Fierce battles engulfed five of six major South Vietnamese cities, and a few were taken temporarily. Rather than a major military victory, Tet was a political coup, in that it demonstrated a large gap between reality and U.S. military-reported conditions. By March 1968, forty-nine percent of Americans believed the war was an “error.” *New York Times*, February 27, May 17, August 29, October 3, November 11, and December 11 and 31, 1967, and March 10, 1968. For more on the Tet Offensive and its impact, see Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 216-225.

²⁰ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 672.

²¹ Jackson’s opposition turned out to be ironic, considering the often positive publicity he received during the PPC itself and then his demotion by Abernathy before Resurrection City fell apart. For example, see “Emerging Rights Leader: Jesse Louis Jackson,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1968; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 27, 1968; “Jesse Jackson Emerging as Poor Campaign’s Hero,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 1, 1968; and Jackson, “Resurrection City: The Dream, The Accomplishments,” *Ebony* 23 (October 1968): 65-70, 74.

“There is in my mind a very real question as to whether SCLC can maintain control and discipline over the April demonstration,” he warned, “even if the methods are limited to constitutional and nonviolent tactics.”²² Prominent SCLC board member Marian Logan echoed this sentiment, even after the board reluctantly endorsed the campaign in February 1968. “This bringing of poor people to the seat of government was like throwing it in their faces,” she recalled, predicting that the campaign would guarantee a conservative president and Congress.²³

Such argumentation did not dissuade King from forging ahead as planned. By the time King spoke in late October to the members of the president’s commission on urban disorders – the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, or the Kerner Commission – he was convinced that a massive civil disobedience campaign was viable. It was also a legitimate alternative to the rhetoric of Oakland’s Black Panther Party, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and other organizations that embraced elements of “any means necessary” to forward black freedom. Non-violence could still work, he argued, because there was no other peaceful alternative. After advocating a new “bill of rights for the disadvantaged” during the

²² Bayard Rustin, “Memo on the Spring Protest in Washington, D.C.,” in *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, ed. Bayard Rustin (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 204. See also Rustin, “From Protest to Politics,” in *Black Revolt: Strategies of Protest*, ed. Doris Y. Wilkinson (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan Publishing Corp., 1969).

²³ Quote in Marian Logan in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 455. Bayard Rustin, “The Lessons of the Long Hot Summer,” “Minorities: The War Amidst Poverty,” and “Memo on the Spring Protest in Washington, D.C.,” in *Down the Line*, ed. Bayard Rustin, 187-199, 200-201, 202-205; Marian Logan memo to Martin Luther King Jr., March 8, 1968, in Box 40, Folder 3, Part 2, Reel 6, frames 360-365, and executive committee meeting minutes, December 27, 1967, Box 49, Folder 11, Part 2, Reel 13, frames 0034-0043, both in SCLC; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 584-585; and Young, *An Easy Burden*, 444.

hearings, including \$20 billion for a guaranteed annual income, slum eradication, and housing improvement, King unveiled to the press his determination to have a “camp-in” in Washington to dramatize the issue of poverty and opportunity. Although it was another six weeks before he officially announced the campaign, King publicly committed SCLC that day in late October.²⁴

It remains striking how few people King talked with as he pondered such an ambitious campaign. While scholars have documented well the critique by Bevel and other insiders, no historians have pointed out how limited a group they really were.²⁵ Yet a review of SCLC and King records shows very little effort by King in the fall of 1967 to discuss the PPC concept and its implications with those activists beyond his inner circle of advisors – such as poor people in Mississippi, community activists in Washington, D.C., or non-black minorities in California. SCLC only dispatched staffer Stoney Cooks to gauge support on college campuses in late November *after* he had settled on a decision. Other than a chance meeting with Reies Tijerina at the Chicago airport, he made no effort to reach ethnic Mexicans until 1968. Thus, while determining whether his organization would take on arguably its most ambitious action to date, King failed to consult with a whole swath of activists from not just the black freedom struggle, but also the other burgeoning movements of the time. How this might have changed the tone or scope of the campaign remains

²⁴ Statement to the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, October 23, 1967, Box 13, Speeches, KP; and *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post*, October 24, 1967.

²⁵ See Ling, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, 273-275; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 341; Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 634-655; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 358-362; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 578-593.

uncertain; it may well have made a difference in how SCLC approached the campaign tactically, particularly the development of basic campaign goals and specific roles for its coalitional partners. Instead, King entered an entire new realm when he called all ethnic minorities together to stand and fight. In a campaign of challenges, mobilization beyond the organization's traditional constituency proved to be SCLC's greatest challenge – one that, more than anything, exposed the deep flaws in SCLC's top-down leadership and organizing model.²⁶

* * *

By the time King unveiled the Washington Spring Project in December, neither his radical critique of American society and its foreign policy, nor his ambitious protest plans to challenge them, came as a surprise to attentive observers, including those in the media.²⁷ But although largely unnoticed, or at least uncommented upon, by a press corps fixated on the campaign's potential for violence, a significant new element in King's vision had emerged: the explicit inclusion of non-African American minorities in an SCLC-led campaign. "We also look for participation by representatives of the millions of non-Negro poor: Indians, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachian whites, and others," King

²⁶ Stoney Cooks, interview by Kay Shannon, July 12, 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC; and Tijerina letter to King, September 7, 1967, Box 34, Folder 20, in Reies López Tijerina Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico (hereafter known as RLIT). Incoming letters to King and SCLC demonstrate not only a deep concern with issues of economic justice, jobs, and welfare, but the belief that King could make a difference in people's lives. Yet, uniformly there was very little mention of his proposed campaign to dramatize the issue of poverty in late 1967 and early 1968.

²⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, August 16 and October 24, 1967; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 578-579; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 357-359.

stated, before asking for help from all “Americans of goodwill.”²⁸ By including Native Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans, King had taken an important step, at least rhetorically, toward building an explicitly class-based coalition of poor people and their allies that went beyond black and white. For the rest of his short life, this inclusive rhetoric appeared in nearly all of King’s public discussions of the campaign.

To be sure, other national civil rights organizations had made gestures to non-black minorities during the 1960s. In addition to SNCC and CORE support of the United Farm Workers starting in 1965, these efforts included the NAACP Legal Defense Fund’s assistance in winning grant money to establish the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund in early 1967, and the NAACP’s occasional cooperation with the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) in the early and mid-1960s. The Black Panther Party and the newly founded Peace and Freedom Party in California also began to reach out to the farm workers and other ethnic Mexican groups. The organizers of the Conference on New Politics – an interracial anti-war effort to build a radical third party – invited Chicano leaders Reies Tijerina and Corky Gonzales to its August 1967 meeting in Chicago. And while King formulated his plans for the spring, both SNCC and the Los Angeles-based black cultural nationalist US organization sent representatives to the annual convention of Tijerina’s Alianza Federal de

²⁸ Transcript of campaign press conference, December 4, 1967, Box 13, Speeches, KP. None of the reporters’ questions touched on the multiethnic nature of King’s proposal, nor did the coverage of most mainstream press outlets the next day, including the *New York Times*. See *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 1967. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Atlanta Constitution* both mention the multiethnic quality, but proceed to bury it in the second-to-last paragraph. The *LA Times* adds that, “there is little indication that such assistance from those quarters is forthcoming.” “King Tells of Plans for Civil Disobedience,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1967.

Mercedes (Alianza) in New Mexico, where both sides signed a symbolic non-aggression pact.²⁹

Other movement cross-pollination existed as well. For instance, Betita Martínez and Maria Varela, two future Chicano movement leaders, first became seasoned activists as full-time SNCC staffers. Martínez, known then as Elizabeth Sutherland, managed the organization's New York office, as well as worked briefly with the Black Panthers, before co-founding the Chicano newspaper *El Grito del Norte* in Española, New Mexico. Varela provided support for local SNCC organizers, including photography, for southern states. After meeting Tijerina at the New Politics Conference in 1967, Varela eventually joined the Alianza in New Mexico and assisted with the southwestern contingent of the Poor People's Campaign. She later became involved as a photographer and writer in the Chicano Press Association and helped found another land grant organization called La Cooperativa in northern New Mexico.³⁰

As a result of his more vocal stance against the Vietnam War, King maintained a strong network among African American activists, stretching from his home base in Atlanta and the Deep South to the far reaches of Los Angeles and the West Coast. He could still

²⁹ Maria Varela, Chicana activist, interview by author, August 30, 2005, Albuquerque, New Mexico; Tijerina letter to King, September 7, 1967, Box 34, Folder 20, RLT; "CORE Backs California Grape Workers in Strike Against Schenley," press release, December 17, 1965, Box 4, Folder 9, WILEY; Griswold del Castillo and Garcia, *César Chávez*, 48; Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 112; and García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 214-215.

³⁰ Maria Varela, interview by author; Acuña, *Occupied America*, 358, 370-371; and Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez, "'On Time' in Mississippi: 1964-1994," *Z magazine* 7 (September 1994): 37-40, and Martínez, ed., *Letters from Mississippi* (Brookline, Mass.: Zephyr Press, 2007).

speak to moderates such as Bayard Rustin as well as to advocates of Black Power, such as Stokely Carmichael, with whom he shared a deep respect and friendship. He had begun to strengthen relationships with peace activists, both former SCLC workers and members of more pacifist organizations like the American Friends Service Committee. But when it came time to build a multiethnic coalition that included ethnic Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians, King and SCLC had painfully few contacts.

Although King had some knowledge of César Chávez's activism, he did not know any other leaders in the burgeoning Chicano movement – or of their own efforts to build interethnic coalitions. With the idea of a Washington campaign still in its infancy, King briefly met both Tijerina and Gonzales in Chicago during the National Conference for New Politics. Tijerina proved a particularly intriguing figure – although one King apparently forgot after meeting him. A passionate evangelical minister who had founded the Alianza in 1963 to fight for land grant rights under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Tijerina had gained national notoriety for a citizen's arrest turned violent at the Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico, courthouse in June 1967.³¹ The action gained Tijerina some legitimacy among

³¹ Twenty followers of Tijerina's went to Tierra Amarilla, the dusty county seat of Rio Arriba County, New Mexico, in order to place District Attorney Alfonso Sánchez under citizen's arrest. Sánchez had pursued assault charges against Tijerina, who, in the name of ethnic Mexican land rights, attempted to place two park rangers at the Kit Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico under citizen's arrest for trespassing. Sánchez, however, was not at the courthouse and in their frustration, the Alianza members wounded the jailer. Tijerina was not present, but became a wanted man by authorities and a hero in the eyes of black activists like Karenga and Featherstone. For narratives of Tierra Amarilla, including the courtroom case to come later, see Richard Gardner, *Grito! Reies Tijerina and the New Mexico Land Grant War of 1967* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); Patricia Bell Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants: Mexican Americans in Struggle for Their Heritage* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); and Peter Nabokov, *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969). Unhappy with these accounts, Tijerina provides his own retelling, first published in Spanish, and then in English. Tijerina, *Mi Lucha por La Tierra* (Mexico City: Fondo de

members of the New Left, leading to his invitation to the New Politics conference.³² The willingness of Tijerina's followers to arm themselves and challenge the local authorities, ironically to make a nonviolent citizen's arrest, specifically won the respect of Black Power advocates, such as the US organization's Ron Karenga and SNCC's Ralph Featherstone and Willie Ricks.³³ Seeing an opportunity to expand the reach of his message, Tijerina invited King, Karenga and others to the Alianza convention in October 1967. Karenga addressed the convention in Spanish, while representatives of other black groups came, including Featherstone, Ricks, Walter Bremond of Los Angeles' Black Congress, James Dennis of CORE, and Anthony Babu of the Black Panther Party. Thomas Banyacya, a spiritual leader

Cultura Economica, 1978), later translated into 'Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger': My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights*, trans. José Angel Gutiérrez (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000).

³² The organizers of the New Politics conference – an amalgam of mostly white and black radicals, with a few more establishment activists mixed in – had originally wanted King to team up with famed pediatrician Benjamin Spock on a progressive presidential ticket. King vehemently denied any interest in running for electoral politics, but agreed to address the convention. As it approached, however, he became more apprehensive, especially after hearing some activists' critique that he was "too moderate and bourgeois." He feared he would be heckled, but instead attendees were so bored that many left before his speech was over. Scholars have dismissed the convention as irrelevant and hopelessly chaotic, citing the "white guilt" that allowed Black Power advocates to represent fifty percent of the delegates' votes despite only making up less than twenty percent of the attendees. The convention adjourned without accomplishing much of anything and opened up an opportunity for the liberal McCarthy wing of the Democratic Party to challenge President Johnson. Simon Hall, "On the Tail of the Panther: Black Power and the 1967 Convention of the National Conference for New Politics," *Journal of American Studies* 37 (2003): 59-78; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 226-227, 245, 294; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 557, 559, 562, 577.

³³ The US Organization, founded by Ron Karenga and based in Los Angeles, sought black cultural – and thus political – unity through the use of selected African rituals, customs, and symbols. Its most lasting contribution is the Kwanzaa celebration, first introduced by Karenga in 1966. Scot Brown, "The Politics of Culture: The US Organization and the Quest for Black 'Unity,'" in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, eds. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 223-254. See also Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

of the Free Hopi Nation and an old friend of Tijerina's, was also present. During the convention, these leaders signed the largely symbolic "Treaty of Peace, Harmony, and Mutual Assistance at Albuquerque," in which they pledged support to their brethren of color.³⁴ Tijerina also invited King, who did not attend. Other than a brief December telegram demonstrating his support amid Tijerina's trouble with New Mexican officials, I have not found evidence of communication between the two men until March 1968.³⁵

Organizers of the Conference on New Politics also noticed Corky Gonzales' activism through the Crusade for Justice and invited him to attend – an opportunity, in Gonzales' eyes, to develop ties with other ethnic Mexican activists and to build a more regional, if not national, movement. Gonzales, a former boxer, bail bondsman, and Democratic Party activist, had been the chairman of Denver's War on Poverty Inc. Unsubstantiated charges of favoritism sparked a rift between Gonzales and local elites, leading to his firing and his founding of the Chicano self-defense organization, Crusade for Justice. At the Chicago conference, a low turnout of two dozen or so Latinos disappointed him. Gonzales met King, but what impressed the Chicano leader the most was the power African Americans seemed to hold in relation to the convention's white radicals and liberals.

³⁴ Maulana Ron Karenga, "Gente de Color: Vamos a Sobrevivir – People of Color: We Shall Survive," 1967, in Box 34, Folder 24, and FBI file, SAC-Abq, December 27, 1967, Box 2, Folder 23, both in RLT. In the FBI document, the agent comments that the new alliance was not necessarily popular among rank-and-file members of the Alianza: "A great many AFDM members from the northern part of New Mexico did not attend the convention because of their objection to Reies Tijerina's alliance with Negro groups. They were objecting to the tactics of Tijerina." This has not been corroborated, however. For instance, there was not a noticeable drop in attendance from the previous year.

³⁵ Arthur Vasquez, FBI memo "Mexican-American Militancy" to Kenneth Smith, Box 3, Folder 1; Tijerina letter to King, September 7, 1967, Box 34, Folder 20;; King telegrams to Tijerina, January 8, 1968, and March 5, 1968; and *Farmington Daily Times*, March 14, 1968, Box 61, Folder 5, all in RLT.

He envisioned the same potential for ethnic Mexicans, a seed he placed in the minds of the other ethnic Mexicans present. At least according to one scholar, Gonzales' fraternization with King, Tijerina, and other "agitators" also prompted the interest of the Chicago "red squad" and FBI informers, making him yet another target of the federal government's domestic spying program.³⁶

Although there were arguably more ties between Black Power activists of the late 1960s and their Chicano movement counterparts in locales such as Denver and the San Francisco Bay Area, King and those affiliated with the earlier African American freedom struggle had many admirers among ethnic Mexican activists, both those who identified as Chicanos and more assimilated Mexican Americans. Bert Corona, president of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), expressed his great admiration for what black activists had accomplished and the model they set for other minority groups fighting for their rights. "We in MAPA were clearly influenced and motivated by the black civil rights movement," Corona writes in his memoir. "That didn't mean that our struggles came only as a reaction to those of blacks; we had our own history in fighting for civil and human rights. But the so-called black revolution of the 1960s affected us in many ways."³⁷ This sentiment applied particularly to King's contribution to the freedom struggle. When King died, Corona offered a moving eulogy in *La Raza*: "It was Martin Luther King who taught us

³⁶ *El Gallo*, August 31, 1967; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 39-40, 53. The Chicago Police Intelligence Unit actually stole the organizers' files, which were eventually given to the Chicago Historical Society as a result of a lawsuit. These files are a rich source for community organizing in Chicago, however, strict rules dictated by the court limit use for publication.

³⁷ García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 214.

to value ourselves as individuals. His example proved for us that all farm workers, Mexicans, Filipinos, Negroes, Anglos, could live together and work together to gain place in society which we merit as men. ... We have a debt to Dr. King, a debt larger than to any living man.”³⁸

César Chávez reaffirmed Corona’s words. “(M)uch of the courage which we have found in our struggle for justice in the fields had had its roots in the example set by your husband and by those multitudes who followed his non-violent leadership,” he wrote in a message to Coretta Scott King after the assassination. “We owe so much to Dr. Martin Luther King that words alone cannot express our gratefulness.”³⁹ Although some of this could be considered the standard romanticization of a life violently cut short, other younger self-described Chicanos repeated such accolades, as Chicano newspapers seemed to mourn his death as a loss for themselves as much as for African Americans. Declared Alba Sanchez for *LADO*, the newspaper of Chicago’s Latin American Defense Organization: “(King) did not merely work for the black poor and the black minority but for all poor and all minorities – including the Latin people.”⁴⁰

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While King may have received ethnic Mexicans’ admiration from a distance, such esteem did not translate into the kind of concrete relationships that the grassroots organizing

³⁸ *La Raza* (Los Angeles), May 11, 1968.

³⁹ *El Grito del Norte* (Española, New Mexico), Spring 1968.

⁴⁰ Quote in *LADO*, May-June 1968. See also (East Los Angeles) *Chicano Student*, April 25, 1968; and (San Antonio) *Inferno*, and (Denver) *El Gallo*, both May 1968.

of other movement groups, such as SNCC, once had created. The Poor People's Campaign posed many challenges to SCLC, but at least while King was alive, mobilization would prove to be the most difficult task. Admitting that the campaign would tax his organization greatly, King simultaneously made several personnel moves in order to strengthen SCLC's finances and administration in preparation for it, hiring William Rutherford and Bernard Lafayette. While Rutherford, a Chicago native and a skilled public relations manager, was charged with tightening SCLC's loose organizational ship, much of the burden of the Poor People's Campaign – and specifically, mobilization – fell on the shoulders of Lafayette.⁴¹

Brought in as SCLC's program administrator, Lafayette had a long resume full of organizational and personal affiliations – essential to making King's multiethnic vision of the PPC a reality. As a student at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Lafayette interacted with fellow seminarian James Bevel, helped coordinate the sit-ins there in 1960, and went to work with SNCC in several of the movement's most recognizable flashpoints: the Freedom Rides, Aniston, Birmingham, and Selma.⁴² In 1964, he joined the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and went to Chicago, where he later became a key local ally of SCLC during the Chicago Freedom Movement. He then helped Bevel

⁴¹ SCLC press release, December 13, 1967, Box 122, Folder 8, and Bill Rutherford letter to King, September 21, 1967, Box 5, Folder 15, both in SCLC; *New York Times*, December 5 and 14, 1967; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 583-587. Rutherford was successful in making SCLC staff more accountable for expenditures – and therefore made the organization more efficient – but not without stepping on some toes. Rutherford memos to SCLC Steering Committee, December 8 and 11, 1967, Box 48, Folder 3, and Hosea Williams memo to Rutherford, December 15, 1967, Box 57, Folder 2, all in SCLC.

⁴² Lafayette went to Selma in 1963 as a field secretary with SNCC – two years before James Bevel convinced King and SCLC to go there. Bernard Lafayette, interview by author, June 13, 2005, by telephone; and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1981), 157.

coordinate the National Mobilization against the Vietnam War in the spring of 1967 in New York City – again coinciding with King’s own rhetoric, this time on the war. That fall, King asked Lafayette to join SCLC and quickly placed him in charge of the PPC, confident that Lafayette’s legitimacy among both peace activists and grassroots civil rights organizers would help form the broad progressive foundation the Poor People’s Campaign sought. That anti-war protest had begun to emerge as an important unifying element of the burgeoning Chicano movement also made Lafayette a reasonable choice to reach out to ethnic Mexicans – although it is not clear that King knew this.⁴³ Unfortunately, Lafayette’s anti-war contacts remained mostly in the East and Midwest, a mix of white, black, and a few American Indians. Other than Maria Varela, with whom he worked in Selma briefly, Lafayette proved to have just as few ties with activists of Mexican descent as King and the rest of SCLC’s executive council.⁴⁴

A month later, this lack of networking with ethnic Mexicans had become increasingly apparent. In mid-January 1968, when announcing their plan to bring 3,000 organizers trained in non-violent protest to Washington, King, Lafayette, and Hosea Williams listed only target cities in the East, Midwest, and South. Although cities such as Detroit and

⁴³ Watching a disproportionate number of ethnic Mexican men come home in body bags in a war against another colonized people of color struck a chord with those embracing the emerging Chicano nationalism of the time – including Corky Gonzales. See Oropeza, *¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No!*, 75-76, 79, 81-92.

⁴⁴ King letter to Lafayette, 1967, Box 4, Folder 26, and SCLC press release, December 13, 1967, Box 122, Folder 8, both in SCLC; Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon, July 19, 1968, MSRC; *New York Times*, December 14, 1967; and Carson, *In Struggle*, 21, 157. For more on Lafayette’s activism, see Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*; and David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998).

Chicago did have sizable ethnic Mexican communities, campaign memorandums on both SCLC staff assignments and supporting organizations and individuals included only a handful of non-black activists such as Puerto Rican activist Grace Mora Newman of the Bronx's Fort Hood Three Committee. Places such as California, Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico, where the majority of ethnic Mexican activism had occurred, went unmentioned. When asked about other minorities' participation, King assured the press that, "This is a march of poor people on Washington. ... Naturally, it will be predominately Negro ... because the Negro is the poorest of the poor in proportion to his size in the population. But ... it will not be an all black march."⁴⁵ Behind the scenes, however, the campaign looked very much all-black.⁴⁶

To address this situation, Lafayette hired two assistants, former AFSC colleague Tom Houck and civil rights veteran Ernie Austin to help reach out to organizations and individuals not usually in the SCLC rolodex. They had a daunting task ahead of them, particularly for an organization not known for its grassroots acumen beyond a loose network of black churches. In the past, whether it was Birmingham or Selma, Albany or St. Augustine, SCLC had arrived on the scene after much of the groundwork had been laid by

⁴⁵ "Why We Need to Go to Washington" press conference transcript, January 16, 1968, 6, Box 14, Speeches, KP.

⁴⁶ Bernard Lafayette memo to SCLC staff, January 20, 1968, Box 34, Folder 19, SCLC; Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and *Washington Post*, January 17, 1968.

groups such as SNCC working with local people. But in Washington, SCLC was building the campaign from scratch.⁴⁷

From the end of January to the beginning of March, Lafayette, Houck, and Austin directed an effort to contact literally thousands of people to compile a list of interested organizations and individuals. Lafayette recalls that they had little time to get to know other ethnic leaders in a casual manner – “It wasn’t gradual ... it was real fast” – and thus, the relationships were often superficial. At first, they relied on lists and contacts from organizations that came on board early, including the American Friends Service Committee, the United Church of Christ (of which Andrew Young was a minister), the World Council of Churches, and the Spring Mobilization Committee. AFSC proved particularly helpful due to its deep contacts among American Indians and ethnic Mexicans, often stemming from shared interests in peace. AFSC’s presence in Denver, for instance, helped bring on board Corky Gonzales and Tillie Walker, director of the United Scholarship Service, an education support agency for Indians and ethnic Mexicans. A Mandan originally from South Dakota, Walker in turn proved enthusiastic in tapping into her vast Indian network for the campaign. Also, the Highlander Folk School’s Myles Horton and Guy Carawan, activists who had worked with SCLC and SNCC since the 1950s, proved indispensable in reaching poor

⁴⁷ Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and Ernie Austin, interview by Kay Shannon, July 6, 1968, in Washington, D.C., MSRC. For criticism of SCLC’s exploitation of existing grassroots work, see Carson, *In Struggle*, 62-63, 153-164; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 92-93, 99; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 558, 578-579; Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 305, 445-446; and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 282-283, 345-346.

whites in Appalachia and elsewhere. Houck estimated that, by mid-March, they had written some 10,000 letters and telegrams to potential supporters and had made “a couple of thousand dollars worth of phone calls.”⁴⁸

But throughout these efforts, King remained concerned that mobilization was moving too slowly, and that organizers recruited mainly middle-class leaders and not hard-core poor people. During an action team meeting in early February, he chastised Lafayette and others on their recruiting:

We have not recruited twenty folks that are people who will go and stay with us. I am disturbed about the fact that our staff has not gotten to the people we are talking about – not young people, middle-class people, etc., but the hard-core poor people. ... We can get a lot of people there; that is not the problem. But the much greater thing is for us to get the poor people who will be demanding something because they have been deprived.⁴⁹

As a result, King called at least two emergency meetings, in mid-January and again in mid-February, for all staff to discuss how they could improve mobilization – otherwise, he said that he would consider canceling the march. One outcome was the proposal to bring together representatives from interested organizations – particularly non-black groups – to discuss the goals and origins of the upcoming campaign.

⁴⁸ Quote by Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon. Also, Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; Ernie Austin, interview by Shannon; Barbara Moffett memo to Warren Witte, February 23, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32557, “Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials - Regional, 1968,” and Steve Cary memo, February 9, 1968, and Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, February 26, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32556, “Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials,” all in AFSC; and Pam Coe, of AFSC's American Indian Program, letter to Tom Houck, March 1, 1968, Box 177, Folder 18, SCLC. In addition to listing Indian organizations to contact, Coe suggested that to increase turnout for the Minority Group Conference, it should be in Denver or Chicago.

⁴⁹ “Action Committee Meeting” transcript, February 11, 1968, Box 34, Folder 15, KP.

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Goals had always been an issue, at least since King had sketched out his plans in December 1967, if not before. Questions regarding what King really wanted to accomplish infused early press reports and editorials. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* capital bureau chief mused whether Washington political circles were correct that King mostly sought to outflank Black Power adherents, while other opinion-makers, such as the *Atlanta Constitution* editorial page, wondered if King really had thought it all through.⁵⁰ But while journalists focused on process, and the risk of violence, potential campaign participants asked other more substantive questions. Would the Poor People's Campaign call for peace and make explicit connections, as King had before, between the war in Vietnam and the listing War on Poverty? Would it demand government jobs, assistance in attaining private-sector jobs, welfare reforms, or all three? How would it incorporate the objectives of other minorities, not necessarily the same as SCLC's perceived goals? Or would it have explicit goals at all?

Such questions arose repeatedly in early 1968, and many of the sharpest questions continued to come from within King's inner circle. James Bevel remained adamant that SCLC had to call for an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, while Jesse Jackson saw Operation Breadbasket's local approach to job creation as a more fruitful model for economic justice.⁵¹ Bayard Rustin, skeptical at best but also aware that King was deeply committed to the campaign, said the only way to make the PPC effective was to draw up a

⁵⁰ *Los Angeles Times* and *Atlanta Constitution*, both December 6, 1967.

⁵¹ King did not describe his philosophy of late 1967 and 1968 as "socialist" or "Marxist-Leninist" in public, but he privately confided to Marxist intellectual C.L.R. James that that was indeed where he stood. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 716-717, n19.

list of specific, achievable objectives – that allowed SCLC to declare victory and go home. Otherwise, the campaign not only risked violence, but could further embolden the movement’s conservative critics in Congress, the press, and elsewhere, he said.⁵²

Historians have suggested that much of this debate took place behind closed doors – a battle among King and his closest advisors.⁵³ But by mid-February, as SCLC organizers reached out to new constituencies, the discussions involved more and more people. Groups such as AFSC and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) insisted on more specific goals. SCLC had turned to AFSC immediately because, as Bill Rutherford described it, the Quaker organization “is the only group in America with whom we can identify totally in terms of their devotion to non-violence and the struggle for freedom.”⁵⁴ Indeed, the long-time pacifist organization founded during World War I not only adhered to non-violence as a central philosophy, but its members were often the few whites in southern towns to champion black civil rights early, particularly open housing, voting rights, and

⁵² Executive staff meeting transcript, December 27, 1967, Box 49, Folder 11, SCLC; Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon; “Call to Americans of Goodwill” reprinted in *New York Times*, June 3, 1968; *New York Times*, June 7-8, 1968; Bayard Rustin, “Memo on the Spring Protest,” in *Down the Line*, 202-2051; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 590-91. In many ways, Rustin’s document resembled the “Freedom Budget” he and A. Philip Randolph unveiled in the fall of 1966. After initial enthusiasm by potential allies on the left, including King, the proposed program went nowhere as it drew the increasing ire of anti-war activists who accused Rustin of implicitly endorsing current defense budgets, and therefore the Vietnam War. Rustin’s decision to decouple the war from issues of economic justice proved particularly ironic considering his longtime activism in pacifist organizations. D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 429-439.

⁵³ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 341-345; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 358-359, 362; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 590-593, 600-604.

⁵⁴ Bill Rutherford letter to Harry Wachtel, January 25, 1968, Box 56, Folder 10, SCLC. See also King telegram to Colin Bell, December 6, 1967, CRD Administration Folder 32556, “Poor People’s Campaign: General, Planning Materials,” AFSC.

school desegregation.⁵⁵ AFSC saw its participation in the PPC as a continuation of a “common cause . . . to build the same kind of society, one that does violence to no man; one that recognizes the brotherhood of all men,” stated Colin Bell, AFSC’s executive secretary. “There is no doubt that Dr. King is addressing himself to a sickness in our society.”⁵⁶

In the early stages, AFSC officials were the only outside representatives asked to participate on every level of the campaign, from the Research Committee to grassroots recruiting. And they often proved quite blunt in their critique of SCLC plans. Although the organization did not come on board officially until February, AFSC officials became intimately involved from the beginning. In December 1967, Marjorie Penney, director of the AFSC’s Fellowship House in Philadelphia and an old friend of King’s, complained that James Orange, the local SCLC coordinator, offered “unbelievably confusing” presentations, and “depending on the audience, he gave widely differing pictures of his mission and SCLC plans for coming here. The total effect has been one of unusual irresponsibility.”⁵⁷ AFSC

⁵⁵ For instance, the AFSC Family Aid Fund helped black families, such as the Carters of Sunflower County, Mississippi, withstand financial and physical intimidation in order to send their children to white schools. And in Florida, the local Friends society in St. Petersburg played a key supporting role to striking sanitation workers by offering not only funds, but also literacy classes and space to meet. Constance Curry, *Silver Rights* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1995), xxiii, 59, 132-133, 138, 140, 143-145, 208-209; and Daryl Paulson and Janet Stiff, “An Empty Victory: The St. Petersburg Sanitation Strike, 1968,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (1979): 421-433. Remarkably, there is no full study devoted to the AFSC’s activities in civil rights; most scholarship give the organization only passing mention. See Nahfiza Ahmed, “The Neighborhood Organization Workers of Mobile, Alabama: Black Power Politics and Local Civil Rights Activism in the Deep South, 1968-1971,” *Southern Historian* 20 (1999): 25-40; and Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 68-93.

⁵⁶ *Quaker Service: Bulletin of American Friends Service Committee*, Summer 1968.

⁵⁷ Marjorie Penney letter to Andrew Young, December 19, 1967, Box 39, Folder 23, Part 2, Reel 6, frame 0011, SCLC. Penney knew King from his seminary days in Chester, Pennsylvania, and encouraged King to make Philadelphia his foray into the North. Countryman, *Up South*, 175-177.

officials also raised concerns over SCLC's initial unwillingness to include non-black participants in decision-making, as well as the location of the Minority Group Conference in Atlanta rather than a more central location such as Chicago or Denver. During the next two months, King and his aides responded to such criticism by offering AFSC's top officials unprecedented access to discussions of the campaign's organization, publicity, and goal-setting. This established AFSC as a key partner in the campaign's preparation.⁵⁸

Yet while AFSC participation made a significant difference in SCLC recruitment of the non-black poor, campaign goals remained unfocused two months later. Of particular concern, in the eyes of pacifist AFSC leaders, was the marginalization of the Vietnam War. Calling the campaign's priorities "disastrously confused," the AFSC's Barbara Moffett offered a five-page memo responding to an SCLC-authored "manifesto" on the campaign. The memo detailed the manifesto's shortcomings, including the lack of a clear-cut statement, "not subject to distortion, of the reasons for the campaign and goals of this army of the poor"; little explicit language on how the poor would be involved in the planning and implementation of policy changes; and a recognizable framework to make concrete demands. Most egregious, at least to Moffett and AFSC officials, was the lack of a clear position on Vietnam, one that linked the war to the lack of domestic resources. "It seemed to us that this draft ... puts SCLC in a position of accepting the inevitability of continued

⁵⁸ Maria Pappalardo and Eleanor Eaton, "Some Rough Notes on AFSC Staff Discussion," January 5, 1968; Barbara Moffett letter to Bernard Lafayette, January 9, 1968; Stewart Meacham memo to Moffett, January 12, 1968; Charlotte Meacham memo to Lafayette and Bill Rutherford, January 24, 1968; Pappalardo memo to Lafayette and Rutherford, January 24, 1968; Steve Cary memo, February 9, 1968; Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, February 26, 1968; and Eleanor Eaton letter to Tom Houck, February 26, 1968, all in CRD Administration Folder 32556, "Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials," AFSC.

American fighting in Vietnam” when, instead, the organization should declare, in unambiguous language, that “in the name of America’s crying needs, in the name of morality, and in the name of peace, we say: Stop the War.”⁵⁹ Whether the war should be a major campaign goal only loomed larger as tactical discussions continued and the campaign neared.

For NWRO, the other national organization that played a prominent role in the Poor People’s Campaign, the campaign’s goals also became an issue – but for different reasons. Founded in 1966 as a national federation of local welfare rights groups, the NWRO and its thousands of activists had advocated for a variety of poverty-alleviating measures, including expanded welfare budgets, more equitable and respectful treatment of welfare recipients, the right of recipients to have private store credit, and, perhaps its most recognizable issue, the guaranteed national income.⁶⁰ In September 1966, the predecessor to NWRO, the

⁵⁹ Barbara Moffett memo to Martin Luther King Jr. and Harry Wachtel, February 22, 1968, frames 0238-0242, Box 39, Folder 23, Part 2, Reel 6, SCLC; and Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, February 21, 1968, “SCLC’s Second Draft ‘Manifesto,’” CRD Administration Folder 32556, “Poor People’s Campaign: General, Planning Materials,” AFSC.

⁶⁰ I use the term “welfare” as shorthand for the original federal program Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), established under the New Deal in 1935, and the corresponding system of local and state programs. For more on the grassroots nature of NWRO and its treatment of “poor women and men as thinkers as well as actors,” see Kornbluh, *The Battle over Welfare Rights*, 9, “To Fulfill Their ‘Rightly Needs’: Consumerism and the National Welfare Rights Movement,” *Radical History Review* 69 (1997): 76-113, and “Black Buying Power: Welfare Rights, Consumerism, and Northern Protest,” in *Freedom North*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 199-222; and Priscilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Although touching on the NWRO’s grassroots nature, older studies privilege the national organization over its local components, particularly George Wiley, NWRO’s middle-class male leader who drowned at age 42. His tragic death was just one reason why his biography was the first full-length study of the organization. See Nick Kotz and Mary Lynn Kotz, *A Passion for Equality: George A. Wiley and the Movement* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977); Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981); and Frances Fox Piven

Poverty/Rights Action Center headed by George Wiley, sponsored its own “Poor People’s March,” in support of the Office of Economic Opportunity. For more than a year, leaders of the more grassroots-oriented NWRO tried to create a dialogue with the well-established and financially connected SCLC regarding their shared interest in economic justice and failed. Although SCLC had endorsed a guaranteed annual income in 1966, King and his aides did not respond to NWRO queries until planning for the PPC had begun. By that time, Wiley, Johnnie Tillmon, and others in the NWRO leadership were infuriated with King’s promotion of one of their key issues without really demonstrating an interest in the details of welfare policy. His sudden championship of the issue, if anything, risked marginalizing NWRO and years of hard work by a disproportionate number of poor black women. SCLC’s high-handed paternalism toward women appeared to be on display.⁶¹

In response to King’s request for campaign support in January 1968, NWRO officers demanded that King come to Chicago and hear for himself what the organization’s goals and strategy were. After NWRO activists rejected King’s attempt to send Lafayette and his “fourth lieutenants” to Chicago, King, along with Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Al Sampson, and Lafayette, met with Johnnie Tillmon and other female leaders of NWRO on February 3. There, the hosts challenged King immediately. “How do you stand on P.L. 90-

and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Random House, 1977), 264-361.

⁶¹ “The Poor People’s March on Washington” and “Manual for Marchers,” both n.d., and George Wiley and Ed Day, telephone transcript, September 15, 1966, Poor People’s March folder, Box 2101, NWRO; and *New York Times*, August 12, 1966. King discussed the “guaranteed income” in his last book, written in early 1967, but only began to highlight it in his speeches for the campaign in the fall. See *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 162-165, 189.

248?” asked Etta Horn, referring to legislation that added a mandatory work program to Social Security and was dubbed “the anti-welfare bill” by activists.⁶² “Where were you last October,” demanded Beulah Sanders, “when we were down in Washington trying to get support for Senator Kennedy’s amendments?” After much hemming and hawing by the increasingly uncomfortable preachers, NWRO chairwoman Johnnie Tillmon stated, “You know, Dr. King, if you don’t know ... you should say you don’t know,” to which a puzzled and chastened King responded, “We don’t know about welfare. We have come here to learn.”⁶³ From there, the NWRO leaders gave SCLC officials several lessons on welfare policy – including an explanation of the anti-welfare bill mentioned by Horn and Robert Kennedy’s response to it – as well as how important it was that they, their organization, and their hard work be recognized.⁶⁴

From there began a fruitful conversation in which the NWRO eventually agreed to participate fully in the campaign, but with a number of conditions designed to protect its autonomy within the larger structure of the Poor People’s Campaign – a concern that arose repeatedly during preparation for the campaign. Not only did NWRO leaders want “prime responsibility for policy, negotiation, and public statements on welfare issues, public law 90-

⁶² Designed in response to a perceived “welfare crisis,” the Social Security Amendments of 1967 were designed to reduce the welfare rolls. The legislation required most adult welfare recipients to work for wages or enroll in a training program or risk losing their benefits; capped the percentage of a state’s population that could receive federal public assistance; and mandated states to raise their standards of need, the all-important measure used by governments to judge the adequacy of their grants. Despite fierce opposition from NWRO and its allies, Congress passed the package of somewhat contradictory amendments. Kornbluh, *The Battle over Welfare Rights*, 96-100.

⁶³ Tim Sampson, interview by Nick Kotz, Box 25, KOTZ.

⁶⁴ Tim Sampson, interview by Nick Kotz, Box 25, KOTZ.

248,” and “in negotiations with government agencies around these issues,” they insisted on taking the lead on welfare rights workshops, both in recruitment cities and eventually in Resurrection City.⁶⁵ In addition, the NWRO’s planned Mother’s Day march on May 12, headlining Coretta Scott King, would continue to be a welfare rights action, not one shared with SCLC or under the larger umbrella of the Poor People’s Campaign. And under no circumstances would they get themselves arrested. “You’ll go to jail! Don’t you go talking about putting any of us in jail,” declared Beulah Sanders, head of New York City-Wide Coordinating Committee. “We have children to take care of. You men, you go to jail.”⁶⁶ King agreed to all of their demands, but this did not stop SCLC’s relationship with the NWRO from being what one scholar has called a “competitive one” in the months to come.⁶⁷

This relationship, however, was not just competitive from an organizational standpoint. The rhetoric of welfare rights activists did not always seem compatible with SCLC’s, which remained paternalist, if not overtly masculine. Echoing the “I Am a Man” signs prominently displayed by striking sanitation workers in Memphis, King and his aides continued to define the main solution to poverty – and salvaging dignity – as a good-paying

⁶⁵ George Wiley letter to Andrew Young, March 25, 1968, Box 40, Folder 3, Part 2, Reel 6, frames 354-355, SCLC.

⁶⁶ Tim Sampson, interview by Nick Kotz, Box 25, KOTZ.

⁶⁷ Quote in West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement*, 215. Also George Wiley letter to Andrew Young, March 25, 1968, Box 40, Folder 3, Part 2, Reel 6, frames 354-355, SCLC; *Washington Post*, February 6, 1968; West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement*, 214-215; Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 71-72; and NOW!, February 23, 1968, in “Tim Sampson set – newsletters,” Box 8, KOTZ. To drive this independent streak home, the February and March issues of the NWRO newsletter trumpet King’s support for welfare legislation, yet make no mention of the PPC.

job held by a man. “What does it profit a man to be able to have access to any integrated lunch counter when he doesn’t earn enough money to take his wife out to dine?” King asked an audience in Selma, Alabama. “What does it profit a man to have access to the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities when he doesn’t earn enough money to take a vacation?”⁶⁸ In speech after speech, whether it was a press conference or a church-based address in SCLC’s People-to-People campaign recruitment tours, King used similarly gendered language. Jobs in the most traditional sense of the word were front and center. On one level, this was consistent with the original notion of a guaranteed income and even some welfare rights rhetoric. When SCLC, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and unions such as the United Auto Workers endorsed a guaranteed income, they meant for men idled by lost factory jobs. As NWRO head George Wiley told a congressional hearing, “Welfare recipients want there to be jobs available, but we want these jobs to be available to men. ... [L]egitimate heads of households [should] be the ones that get those jobs.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ King, “Pre-Washington Campaign,” February 16, 1968, Selma, Alabama, Box 14, Speeches, KP. The “dine” line, in particular, was one of King’s standards.

⁶⁹ Quote in U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee on Fiscal Policy of the Joint Economic Committee, *Income Maintenance Programs: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Fiscal Policy of the Joint Economic Committee*, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, 60, 77. Also, *UAW Solidarity*, November 1966; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 284-286; Frost, ‘*An Interracial Movement of the Poor*,’ 32-34, 108-109, 149; and King, “Prelude to Tomorrow,” Chicago, January 6, 1968; “Why We Need to Go to Washington” press conference transcript, Atlanta, January 16, 1968; “In Search of a Sense of Direction,” at Vermont Street Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., February 7, 1968; mass meetings, Birmingham and Selma, Ala., February 15 and 16, 1968; address to Ministers Leadership Training Program, Miami, February 23, 1968; mass meetings, Jennings’s Temple Church, Greenwood, Miss., Chapel Hill Baptist Church, Clarksdale, Miss., First New Hope Baptist, Grenada, Miss., and St. Paul Methodist, Laurel, Miss., all on March 19, 1968; mass meeting, First Baptist Church, Eutaw, Ala., March 20, 1968; and PPC rallies, Augusta, Macon, Albany, and Waycross, Ga., March 23, 1968, all in Box 14, Speeches, KP.

But welfare rights activists also sought to expand the definition of work, particularly when so few good jobs were available to poor, uneducated women. Rather than assume that the typical beneficiary was a jobless man, welfare rights organizers such as Johnnie Tillmon and Beulah Sanders saw those single mothers struggling to balance parenting and wage work as the most deserving recipients of a guaranteed income. In the process, they actively expanded the traditional definitions of work, the workplace, and producer. Legitimate “work” included raising children in the home. And mothers were not just potential *consumers*, as King suggested in *Where Do We Go From Here*, but also *producers* of young citizens. As one NWRO activist from Milwaukee said, “I think that the greatest thing that a woman can do is to raise her own children, and our society should recognize it as a job. A person should be paid an adequate income to do that.”⁷⁰

SCLC’S deal with NWRO thus led to the inadvertent endorsement of this redefinition of a guaranteed income – and created yet another reason for labor organizations’ reluctance to join the Poor People’s Campaign. Undoubtedly, African Americans and labor unions have had a long history of distrust and throughout King’s career, a black-labor alliance proved fleeting. In terms of the PPC, scholars have argued that this reluctance stemmed primarily from organized labor’s unwillingness to support the campaign’s anti-war rhetoric and King’s linkages between Vietnam and depleted resources for the War on Poverty.⁷¹ Indeed, George Meany, president of the American Federation of Labor and

⁷⁰ Quote in Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 166. Also, U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee on Fiscal Policy of the Joint Economic Committee, *Income Maintenance Programs*, 58-86; and Kornbluh, *The Battle over Welfare Rights*, 37-38, 50-51, 60-61, 96, 99, 112.

⁷¹ Chase, “Class Resurrection,” 11-13; and Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 185-186.

Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), greatly valued retaining an ally like President Johnson and took pains to support his foreign policy and the War on Poverty.⁷² Meany and the AFL-CIO board steadfastly refused to endorse the PPC. But given the PPC's weak initial position on Vietnam and the increasing opposition among union members against the war, blaming unions' lack of enthusiasm on foreign policy appears too simplistic.⁷³

Rather, the campaign's prominent stance on "work" may very well have made a difference. Argued one "high official" in the AFL-CIO: "Support for this kind of plan just doesn't exist and couldn't exist in a work-oriented culture," as quoted in the *New York Times*.⁷⁴ Moreover, even the most progressive unions that endorsed the campaign, including UAW and the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), took pains not to mention a

⁷² Finding King's position on Vietnam untenable, Meany reaffirmed support for the war. We "in the AFL-CIO are neither 'hawk' nor 'dove – nor 'chicken,'" declared Meany. "... (W)e believe in human freedom and in democracy – not just for ourselves but for everyone who prefers to live under such a system." *American Federationist*, January 1968. Such sentiment certainly reflected the war positions of many predominantly white and male craft unions. See Frank Koscielski, *Divided Loyalties: American Unions and the Vietnam War* (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1999), 17-54; and Edmund F. Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁷³ Certain "old left" unions, such as the United Electrical Workers (UE) and Mine-Mill, had called for an end to the war in 1965. In the next few years, others had joined this growing alliance including the United Packinghouse Workers (UPW) and the United Auto Workers (UAW), the latter of which left the AFL-CIO in the summer of 1968 over policy differences. Organizations such as the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace and the heavily working-class Vietnam Veterans Against the War emerged. The latter reflected the polls from early 1968 that showed that nearly half of rank-and-file union members considered the war a "mistake." Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 48, 52-58; Koscielski, *Divided Loyalties*, 55-87; Albert Vetere Lannon and Marvin Rogoff, "We Shall Not Remain Silent: Building the Anti-Vietnam War Movement in the House of Labor," 66 *Science and Society* (Winter 2002/2003): 536-544; *Packinghouse Worker*, May 1968; *New York Times*, January 3 and 5, 1968; and *Washington Post*, January 3, 1968.

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, May 28, 1968.

guaranteed income in their internal coverage and publicity of the campaign. And UAW President Walter Reuther, the only labor leader with a prominent speaking role during the campaign, restricted his remarks to platitudes about jobs and poverty, not welfare. Exceptions existed of course; most notably, the predominantly female, black, and Puerto Rican Local 1199 of the Hospital and Nursing Home Employees Union backed the campaign enthusiastically. But the consistently mediocre response to the campaign by most labor organizations was an issue of acute concern behind the scenes.⁷⁵

The unexpected clash between the rhetoric of work and that of welfare was just one more example of the complexity of SCLC's challenge in 1968. Three months after the first phase of planning had begun, organization and recruitment for the Poor People's Campaign sputtered. Yet, thanks to such eye-opening experiences as the NWRO confrontation, it had become clear to King that he could not just set a few goals and say paternalistically, "Come, march with me," and people would come – particularly among non-black minorities. Perhaps some of his aides truly believed, referring to Reies Tijerina in a March strategy meeting, "that we were the parents and he was the child," but clearly Tijerina did not.⁷⁶ And increasingly neither did King. Despite garnering widespread respect among ethnic Mexicans as a model of social movement leadership, King had to work to convince them they were welcome and part of the larger strategy, and this might require concessions. According to

⁷⁵ *UAW Solidarity*, August 1968; *Steel Labor*, June and July 1968; *United Mine Workers Journal*, July 1, 1968; *Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 1968; and *Packinghouse Worker*, March, April, May and July 1968. UFW's *El Malcriado* did not publish during the first part of 1968. For SCLC concern, see Billy Hollins memo to Andrew Young, n.d., Box 49, Folder 3, Part 2, Reel 12, frame 0767, SCLC; and Levison and Rutherford telephone conversations, FBI memos, New York, May 8 and 10, 1968.

⁷⁶ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 607.

Jose Angel Gutiérrez, one of the founders of the Mexican American Youth Organization in San Antonio, Texas, he and his fellow activists assumed that the campaign had not been designed for their participation. He summed up the sentiment: “Is this another black-white thing, or are we involved?”⁷⁷ This may explain why so many Chicano activists I have interviewed did not recall the campaign until March or April. Despite King’s inclusive rhetoric earlier, that is when SCLC made a real effort to speak with them, understand their issues, and learn how they defined poverty and its roots.

But if King’s awareness of such inherent tensions had changed markedly, his decision to keep goals vague had not. If anything, such tensions reinforced his decision not to have a concrete list of demands, beyond the broad “jobs and income” motto designed for media consumption. He believed that Congress would not respond to proposals of specific legislation: “Underneath the invitation to prepare programs is the premise that the Government is inherently benevolent – it only awaits presentation of imaginative ideas.” Remaining flexible was key. “(Y)ou can say that the goal of this campaign will be to expose Congress,” he said. “We will escalate the campaign on the basis of the response we get.”⁷⁸ He also believed that a laundry list of policy goals and proposals would turn off the very poor people he wanted to attract. Instead, King’s hope was that, through meetings such as the Minority Group Conference, he could explain the reasoning behind the campaign, listen to potential participants’ issues, and then persuade them to accept some flexibility and

⁷⁷ José Angel Gutiérrez, interview by author, January 8, 2006, by telephone.

⁷⁸ José Yglesias, “Dr. King’s March on Washington, Part II,” *New York Times Magazine* (March 31, 1968), 60.

encourage poor people in their own communities to make the trip to Washington. Here is where his charm and charisma might make the difference. This was how he could build trust. With that in mind, SCLC invited some eighty representatives of the non-black poor to meet for the Minority Group Conference on March 14 at Paschal's Motor Hotel – considered Atlanta's "black city hall" – to discuss this budding multiethnic coalition. Several more people came than were invited, and, as many of the participants would say afterward, the conference proved to be a truly historic occasion.⁷⁹

* * *

The Minority Group Conference was just one day at a small motel, but in many ways, it proved to be one of the triumphs of King's last weeks and of the Poor People's Campaign – yet one often forgotten by historians.⁸⁰ For a rare moment, activists from at least several dozen organizations gathered on more or less equal terms to discuss the merits of King's proposed campaign and what exactly, as a unified group, they wanted to achieve. Almost every sort of social movement organization imaginable was represented in the room: civil rights, student, labor, peace, religious, welfare rights, middle class, working class,

⁷⁹ Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 363.

⁸⁰ King's press conference after the gathering received little attention. Of prominent newspapers, only the *New York Times*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* mention the Minority Group Conference – the *Times* on page thirty-six, the *Constitution* within a larger article on King's presidential preferences, and the *Defender* a barely re-written SCLC press release. Only the *Courier* recognized the conference as "a historic meeting of American minority group leaders." *New York Times*, March 15, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1968; *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 23-29, 1968; and *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 30, 1968. Not even Atlanta's local black newspaper, the *Atlanta Daily World*, mentions the historic gathering. In scholarly works, only Taylor Branch, in the third and final volume of his King trilogy, and Thomas Jackson make substantial mention of the conference. Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 715-717; and Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 348-349. Garrow does not include it, while Fairclough, Honey, Nabokov, Vigil, and Blawis only mention the conference in passing.

Chicano, American Indian, Puerto Rican. In addition to King and his aides, high-profile veterans of grassroots organizing included Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School, Tom Hayden of Students for a Democratic Society, Carl Braden of the Southern Conference Education Fund, former SNCC coordinator John Lewis, now of the Southern Regional Council, as well as Reies Tijerina, Bert Corona, and Corky Gonzales. Yet, what made the conference even more unique, particularly for an SCLC function, was the participation of activists King had barely heard of, activists whose work was grounded deeply in communities in which King had little to no interaction. And it gave these activists the chance to meet not only King, but also each other. For instance, the conference allowed Puerto Rican activist Gilberto Gerena-Valentín of New York to interact with fellow Spanish-speakers Jose Angel Gutiérrez of MAYO, Mario Obledo of Austin's League of Latin Americans Council, and Oliverio Morales of the South Florida Migrants Council, while white Appalachian activists Charles "Buck" Maggard met Mel Thom of the National Indian Youth Council. Only a few invited guests did not make the trip, including César Chávez, who sent a delegate instead.⁸¹

Although King stood at the center of this gathering – his prestige helping mobilize at least some of their attendance – he also had to convince his skeptical guests that the campaign was worthy of their participation. Considering the debates surrounding the campaign's goals, this could have been a tall order. Thus, much of the conference consisted

⁸¹ "American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People's Washington Campaign," SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People's Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO; and "Participants of Minority Group Conference," March 14, 1968, Box 179, Folder 11, Part 4, Reel 27, frames 01009-01016, SCLC.

of a “bull session,” in which participants shared their issues and concerns. Hank Adams of the Indian Committee for Fishing Rights discussed American Indians’ fight for fishing rights on the Nisqually River in Washington state, while white Appalachians talked about their fight against coal companies’ degradation of the land and water supply and the “powerful economic and political managers who want to keep us down.”⁸² Tijerina explained the land grant struggle, as more urban Chicano leaders sketched out issues of police brutality, educational inequality, and language barriers to services. Other issues included independence for the Puerto Rican semi-colony, immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, and greater political participation for minority groups in general. Clearly, “poverty” could be defined in any number of ways, often different than the “jobs or income” emphasis of SCLC and other African American groups.⁸³

While some non-black participants were non-plussed by SCLC aides’ description of “our” campaign, they were pleasantly surprised by King’s openness to their issues and approaches to poverty. The Chicano land grant struggle, for instance, was an extremely different concept than a federal jobs program or a guaranteed income. “(H)e always exhibited a sensitivity to the needs of mexicanos,” wrote Bert Corona, recalling his one meeting with King. “He understood our particular historical conditions, but he also stressed that we needed to struggle together to correct common abuses. He was very sympathetic and

⁸² “American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People’s Washington Campaign,” SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People’s Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO.

⁸³ “American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People’s Washington Campaign,” SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People’s Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO; Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, April 2, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32556, AFSC; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and Bernard Lafayette, interview by author.

supportive.”⁸⁴ Tijerina was also enthusiastic after the conference, saying that King had made a leap “from civil rights to human rights,” which in his interpretation meant “from jobs to land claims. ... What I understand from what Martin Luther King said, he is now committed to all the poor peoples.”⁸⁵

Other remained skeptical of the campaign, yet came away from the conference believing it beneficial. Baldemar Velásquez, the youthful head of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Ohio, said that King’s words resonated with him – a story he often tells while traveling the country forty years later as FLOC’s president. “His comment was when you impede the rich man’s ability to make money, anything is negotiable,” Velásquez recalled. “I came away with that line branded in my brain.”⁸⁶ Even Gutiérrez of MAYO, wary of King’s non-violent strategy and religious training, said the conference allowed him and fellow MAYO activists a chance to meet with their counterparts in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had a presence in Atlanta. Although they attended the meeting in support of Tijerina, they actually stayed with SNCC activists:

The SNCC people were very much in solidarity. We had group cohesion instantly, even though we were just meeting each other. ... We contacted them, and said we’re going to go to this thing, and we need a place to stay. So they opened their doors. ... We tried to interpret to them ... what the Chicano movement was all about. ... And

⁸⁴ García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 216.

⁸⁵ Quote in (San Antonio) *Inferno*, April 1968, and Nabokov, *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid*, 242. As became increasingly clear in the months to come, Tijerina apparently believed King had promised to create a black demand for a return of Southern land, parallel to ethnic Mexicans’ land demands – something Abernathy and SCLC never pursued. Nabokov, *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid*, 248-249.

⁸⁶ Baldemar Velásquez, interview by author, August 8, 2007, by telephone.

vice versa, we'd ask them about black culture, and why not all blacks were militants. ... We were always constantly inquiring of each other for learning experiences.⁸⁷

Most Black Power organizations, such as SNCC in 1968, did not participate in the campaign, but they also agreed not to interfere with King's efforts.⁸⁸

With such a diverse crowd, there was certainly the potential for tension. But even when Peggy Terry of Uptown Chicago's Jobs Or Income Now (JOIN) admitted her background in a Ku Klux Klan family as part of her story of activism, her fellow delegates accepted her. As Gutiérrez said about organizing back in Texas, when white folks were present, you assumed they were radical.⁸⁹ This environment of sharing continued into the evening. Rather than end the conference after dinner, as originally intended, participants wanted to continue their conversations, as well as share a bit of their respective cultures. Father Miguel B arragan of San Antonio, one of the first and most enthusiastic activists to respond to SCLC overtures, sparked a sharing of several styles of music when he sang a handful of Spanish folk songs during dinner. After a meal of southern soul food, a specialty at Paschal's, the attendees broke into caucuses roughly delineated by ethnicity, yet

⁸⁷ Jos e Angel Guti errez, interview by author. He was joined by five other MAYO activists, including Mario Compean and Nacho Perez.

⁸⁸ Despite their opposition to King's tactics, CORE, the Black Panther Party, and the United Black Front, Stokely Carmichael's new alliance in Washington, D.C., took a similar stance. Carmichael's decision stemmed from his friendship with King and his perception that they were on the same side politically, if not strategically. However, some Black Power adherents did eventually attend the campaign in Washington, including Black Panthers like Lauren Watson of Denver, the Blackstone Rangers of Chicago, and the Invaders of Memphis.

⁸⁹ This, of course, was before activists such as Guti errez knew the extent of FBI surveillance of them and their activities. He apparently had been on an FBI and Texas Ranger watchdog list because of a so-called inflammatory speech for MAYO in 1967.

welcoming of members from other groups. Remarkably, the meeting lasted into the wee hours of the morning and ended with a rousing rendition of “We Shall Overcome.”⁹⁰

In addition to hearing each other’s ideas and establishing contact with other progressive people across the country, conference participants began to form the infrastructure of the campaign. They created a steering committee, in which each ethnic group had two representatives, and whose members met again in Atlanta in March to monitor the campaign’s progress, as well as to choose the Committee of 100, which would eventually take the poor people’s demands to Congress. Conference participants also tentatively decided upon the caravans that would carry poor people across the country to Washington. Perhaps the most surprising turn of events was King’s acceptance of a request made by Tijerina, in which the land rights leader proposed prioritizing their demands: American Indians’ issues of fishing rights and respect first; blacks’ issues of jobs and income second; and Chicanos’ issues of land rights, education, and justice third.⁹¹

After attending the conference, Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School and longtime trainer of grassroots organizers, penned a letter to Martin Luther King Jr. and expressed a cautious but real optimism for the campaign’s potential. “I believe we

⁹⁰ Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon.

⁹¹ José Angel Gutiérrez and Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; Leo Nieto, former official with Texas Council of Churches, interview by author, March 9, 2006, by telephone; “Mexican American to Join Rev. Martin Luther King March on Washington,” Alianza press release, n.d., Box 31, Folder 28, and Della Rossa interview with Reies Tijerina, April 15, 1968, 1, Box 52, Folder 5, both in RLT; Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 103; and Doug Otto, “The Use of Converging Caravans in the Poor People’s Campaign: An Historical and Descriptive View,” November 17, 1968, in “PPC – Caravans” folder, no box number, unprocessed papers of Albert E. Gollin, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (hereafter known as AGP). Tijerina claimed later that King had committed to making demands for a restoration of stolen lands for African Americans, although this has not been corroborated.

caught a glimpse of the future ... ,” Horton wrote. “We had there in Atlanta authentic spokesmen for poor Mexican-Americans, American Indians, blacks, and whites, the making of a bottom-up coalition.” But he also recognized that this potential could only be fulfilled if SCLC worked differently than usual, not only by making the end of the Vietnam War a part of the organization’s basic program, but also by encouraging other groups’ autonomous activities:

This, as you know, would require not only sharing of planning but sharing of the publicity where the mass media will be primarily concerned with SCLC. Martin, and those of you close to him, will have to spearhead the putting together of grass roots coalitions for the Washington demonstrations. This could lay the groundwork for something tremendously exciting and significant ... a bona fide coalition. No other organization has this opportunity and therefore, this responsibility.⁹²

Horton’s warning indeed proved prescient. Despite preaching an increasingly radical democratic vision, based upon an aggressive empowerment of the poor, King and his organization would find it difficult to take the necessary organizational steps to allow such a loosely controlled coalition to emerge through SCLC leadership. Such actions seemed to challenge the civil rights organization’s paternalist nature to its core.

* * *

In mid-March, however, a guarded hope slowly began to replace the anxiety felt by King and SCLC officials concerning the campaign. Despite the challenges that the campaign posed to the organization – from competing, even contradictory objectives to questions over

⁹² Myles Horton letter to Andrew Young, April 5, 1968, in Box 177, Folder 20, Part 4, Reel 26, frame 00614, SCLC. Horton dictated the letter immediately after the conference, originally written to King, but did not mail the letter, readdressed to Young, until after his friend’s death. His optimism had turned to despair, at least temporarily: “I am too numbed by Martin’s death to think clearly and I am sending it as dictated in the hopes that you who are his heirs may still find these ideas of some value. ... The lights are dim in my world today.”

the relevance of nonviolent tactics – the PPC took on the appearance of viability. An energy and enthusiasm around the campaign had emerged, buoyed by declarations of support by several key religious and civic organizations, a surge in volunteers in key areas, the recommendations released by the President’s Commission on Civil Disorders (known as the Kerner Commission), and the endorsement of the “non-black poor” in Atlanta. In a week’s time, four religious organizations from Washington, D.C., the Council of Churches, Catholic Archdiocese, Jewish Community Council, and the Washington City Presbytery, added their support, as well as, in a more surprising development, the national board of the NAACP.⁹³ In a unanimous vote, the latter decided to back King’s effort because it gave “an opportunity for the poor people to lobby for themselves.”⁹⁴

Recruitment of individuals to go to Washington also showed signs of improvement. “Philadelphia already has 600,” Young told Levison. “Mississippi has five or six hundred. Every place is running over.”⁹⁵ Although this last part seems to be an exaggeration, given King’s own continued concerns about recruitment, even unsympathetic FBI informants confirmed that the number of volunteers had increased in many locales and that the 200-

⁹³ The support of these religious organizations particularly alarmed FBI officials. “[B]oth Protestant and Catholic leadership in Washington give clear signs of being almost totally unaware of the lawlessness and the violence-prone elements who will be involved in this march,” wrote William Sullivan to Cartha DeLoach. “... I would like to sow the idea that as eminent church leaders they have an enormous responsibility relative to assisting and maintaining law and order.” Sullivan memo to DeLoach, March 20, 1968.

⁹⁴ *Evening Star*, March 13, 1968, and *Washington Daily News*, March 13 and 18, 1968, all in FBI newspaper clippings. Individual NAACP officials remained critical of the campaign, however, including the organization’s treasurer, Alfred Baker Lewis, and its director, Roy Wilkins, who called for the PPC’s cancellation after violence broke out during a King-led march in Memphis. (Grenada, Miss.) *Daily Sentinel*, March 20, 1968, in FBI newspaper clipping file.

⁹⁵ Levison and Young telephone conversation, March 4, 1968, Levison FBI file, KP.

person quotas set by SCLC for each city rapidly were being met. This was particularly true in the strongholds of SCLC or its partners such as Philadelphia, home of AFSC, and Chicago; Alabama, where SCLC confidence in their old stomping grounds translated into a met quota of 300; and Mississippi, where King's "people-to-people" tours had tapped into a strong following among rural folks such as Mae Bertha Carter, a sharecropper-turned-civil rights activist from Drew. Adoring crowds in Mississippi and elsewhere greeted an exhausted yet resilient King, who was moved to tears on more than one occasion by devastating personal stories of poverty and many individuals' willingness to tell their stories in Washington personally.⁹⁶

The despair and frustration he saw and heard on these tours echoed the unsurprising but important conclusions of the Kerner Commission, which warned of "a nation ... moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal" and laid the blame at the feet of "a white society ... deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintained it, and white society condones it."⁹⁷ Although the

⁹⁶ *Birmingham News*, February 25, 1968; *Clarksdale Press Register*, *Laurel Leader Call*, and *Hattiesburg American*, March 20, 1968, all in FBI newspaper clippings; *New York Times*, March 27, 1968, and April 1, 1968; SAC Mobile to FBI director, March 12 and 19, 1968; SAC Jackson to FBI director, March 11 and 19, 1968; SAC Boston to FBI director, March 20, 1968; FBI memos, "WSP Racial Matters," Chicago, March 19, 1968, and New York, March 26, 1968; and Constance Curry, *Silver Rights* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1995), 164-166. Such successes were not universal, however. FBI reports from Richmond, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee, for instance, suggested that recruitment had been a challenge or non-existent, although it appears that the FBI may not have had the best informants in Los Angeles, given the amount of activity surrounding King's March 16 visit and subsequent organizing by both ethnic Mexican and African American activists in preparation for the campaign. FBI memo, SAC Los Angeles to FBI director, March 12, 1968; "WSP Racial Matter," Los Angeles, March 19 and 26, 1968; SAC Milwaukee to FBI director, March 28, 1968; and FBI memo, Richmond, March 12, 1968.

⁹⁷ United States, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 1-2.

commission's report framed the disorders and the racism from which they stemmed solely in terms of black and white – ignoring, for instance, the high-profile uprising in Chicago's Puerto Rican community in 1966 – King made sure to connect its findings and recommendations to the upcoming campaign.⁹⁸ “This report reveals the absolute necessity of our spring campaign in Washington, D.C., for jobs and income and the right to a decent life,” he argued. “... Our experience is that the Federal Government, and most especially Congress, never moves meaningfully against social ills until the nation is confronted directly and massively.”⁹⁹ The question, he asked rhetorically, was to what means would the nation finally respond?

The participation of other minorities, including ethnic Mexicans, also contributed to the campaign's renewed sense of energy. Members of the steering committee chosen by Minority Group Conference delegates went straight to work, meeting a week later to begin hammering out their communities' commitments to the campaign, as well as potential demands. Not surprisingly, activists were at different stages in their commitments to the campaign, often based upon their own groups' strengths and organizational prowess – a reality with which SCLC officials, based on questions during the meeting, were still

⁹⁸ Other than a passing mention to making “good the promises of American democracy to all citizens – urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group” in the report's introduction, the commission focuses solely on the black-white divide. U.S., *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 2. Conspicuously missing was the June 1966 Division Street disorder in Chicago, in which the wounding of a Puerto Rican man by a white police officer sparked three days of disturbances, leaving sixteen people injured and more than fifty buildings destroyed. Such an omission reinforced the stereotype that non-blacks were somehow more passive than their black counterparts, a common claim made after ethnic Mexicans remained on the sidelines during the Watts uprising in 1965. See Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago*; and Acuña, *Occupied America*, 334.

⁹⁹ SCLC press release, March 4, 1968, 2, Box 122, Folder 10, SCLC.

grappling. Grace Mora Newman spoke of printing up to 100,000 PPC leaflets in Spanish and assured everyone that New York's Puerto Rican community would send several busloads to Washington (although not necessarily the fifty to 100 promised by fellow activist Gilberto Gerena-Valentín), while white Chicago welfare rights activists Dovie Coleman and Peggy Terry of Jobs or Income Now (JOIN) said they were busy recruiting "all poor people," including Puerto Ricans, poor whites in Uptown, and Mexican migrants in east Chicago. Hank Adams and Tillie Walker expressed similar initial support among their fellow American Indians, but stressed that "the tribal councils . . . want to make sure that this isn't just a NEGRO movement" and that they would have to contend with at least some anti-black sentiment in their communities, which seemed to surprise a few of the SCLC officials.¹⁰⁰

Others, however, remained more non-committal. Clifton "Click" Johnson, a disabled white Kentuckian with nine children was one. Requesting information about the campaign, Johnson said that, "It's up to the people to decide what kind of a part they want to play. We just came here to try to get a better idea."¹⁰¹ He then explained how challenging communication and coordination was in the region, a problem inherent to the geographically isolated towns of the mountains. He also openly discussed the black-white divide. In response to an SCLC offer to send a recruiter to the area, Johnson implored officials to "send someone intelligent. Not someone who's going to stir up trouble between colored

¹⁰⁰ Lares Tresjan and Sandra Green, minutes of Committee of 100 meeting, n.d. [March 21, 1968?], 1-2, 4, "PPC Steering Committee," Box 2101, NWRO, original emphasis.

¹⁰¹ Tresjan and Green, minutes of Committee of 100 meeting, n.d. [March 21, 1968?], 2, NWRO.

people and white. ... The power structure would like nothing better than to have us fall out among ourselves.”¹⁰²

Undoubtedly, speaking the most were the Chicano activists present. Lares Tresjan, a farm labor organizer from upstate New York, filled in others on the multiethnic efforts by farm workers in Chautauqua County to win both basic living conditions and organizing rights there after the deaths of several workers. But it was Tijerina who succeeded in dominating the meeting at times – who, with his passionate declarations and occasional fist-pounding, had provided the initial Atlanta conference’s most dramatic moments. Mixing criticism and praise of SCLC and his fellow Chicanos, Tijerina applauded King’s vision while questioning why he continued to receive such short notice for strategy sessions. To other Chicanos, he hinted at the underlying tensions created by competition and scolded them not to jeopardize this ripe opportunity. “We were invited. Dr. King initiated this great plan ... it was born in his heart and we must NOT question that,” Tijerina declared. “ ... The last time we were here I noticed that some of the Puerto Ricans and Spanish-Americans were trying to demand too much equality. ... We must not let jealousy blind our reason.” He continued that it was an imperative to explain the march to ethnic Mexicans and include them in the decision-making, something he pushed for the campaign’s duration.¹⁰³

While some Chicano activists were excited about the prospect of both being at the table with their African American counterparts and actually being heard, other potential

¹⁰² Tresjan and Green, minutes of Committee of 100 meeting, n.d. [March 21, 1968?], 1-2, NWRO.

¹⁰³ Tresjan and Green, minutes of Committee of 100 meeting, n.d. [March 21, 1968?], 2-3, 5-6, NWRO; and Leo Nieto, interview by author.

supporters of the campaign remained unconvinced – despite King’s success in balancing his campaign rhetoric and plans, making successful overtures to the non-black poor, and demonstrating his continued ability to attract large groups of followers.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, it seemed it would take some larger dynamic to shift opinion in favor of the Poor People’s Campaign – a very real possibility in a volatile political year in which the Tet Offensive already had sparked a substantial erosion of public support for the Vietnam War and President Lyndon Johnson nearly lost the New Hampshire primary to a little-known senator. The worst in terms of violence and political turmoil was yet to come. But ironically, it took King’s assassination on April 4, 1968, during the Memphis sanitation workers strike, to change the dynamics of campaign recruitment and create a powerful reason for the poor and their activist allies – black and white, Chicano and Indian – to join the campaign: as a tribute to the martyred Baptist preacher cut down at age 39.

* * *

In several conspicuous ways, the Memphis sanitation strike epitomized what King had been discussing in preparation for the PPC. In one labor dispute, the issues of class, race, and gender came crashing together: a nearly all-black sanitation workforce demanding not only union recognition – and the improved wages and benefits that often entailed – but also recognition of the workers’ basic dignity as human beings and as men. “I am a man” became a rallying cry for the striking sanitation workers because these black men saw their masculinity inextricably linked to their ability to provide financially for their families and to

¹⁰⁴ Marian Logan memo to Martin Luther King Jr., March 8, 1968, Box 40, Folder 3, Part 2, Reel 6, frames 360-365, SCLC; and *Washington Post*, March 5, 1968.

protect themselves and their loved ones physically and spiritually from the disrespect that blacks so often endured. The attitude that only real men could do such things echoed King's own rhetoric regarding jobs for black men. Memphis also seemed like a throwback to SCLC's heyday in the early 1960s. Rather than requiring the careful navigation of complicated multiethnic politics or the construction of a new national movement's infrastructure, both inherent to the PPC, the Memphis strike appeared to King as a simpler black-white affair rooted in local activism. Not only did the strike pit an interracial coalition of civil rights and labor activists versus a white paternalistic mayor and his supporters, King also believed he could drop in, make a speech, and then leave without diverting SCLC's already stretched-thin resources. When James Lawson, a veteran organizer of the Nashville sit-ins, invited him to speak on March 18, 1968, King accepted.¹⁰⁵

King's initial choice and then deepening commitment to Memphis, however, highlighted far more than his insistence on transforming the movement by blending race and class, as scholars have illustrated.¹⁰⁶ It yet again demonstrated SCLC's insular decision-making process and how others with vested interest were often left out of those discussions – even when Memphis increasingly affected staffers' planning and challenged King's own

¹⁰⁵ Scholars have given extensive attention to the Memphis strike, undoubtedly because of its role in King's death, but also because of the prominence of gendered rhetoric and labor activism. Joan Turner Beifuss offers the classic narrative. *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike and Martin Luther King* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing Co., 1989; 1985). On the strike's gender dimensions, see Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 131-152; and Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Memphis, as well as the Poor People's Campaign, also serves as an example of the pervasiveness of federal surveillance and counterintelligence. Gerald D. McKnight, "The 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike and the FBI: A Case Study in Urban Surveillance," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 83:2 (1984): 138-156.

¹⁰⁶ See Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, and *Black Workers Remember*, 286-321.

dedication to the PPC. This process began immediately as King failed to anticipate several things: the unusually high level of enthusiasm and exhilaration for his visit, the wild card that the youth gang Memphis Invaders represented, and how outraged King's aides were at his decision to go at the height of their PPC organizing. Andrew Young captured his and other aides' frustration:

I had been down that road enough times to know that to become involved in any way in the garbage workers' strike in Memphis would really mean taking on another campaign. We had been through this too many times to think Martin could just go to Memphis, make a speech, and leave. Albany had started with one little speech. The Meredith march had taken nearly a month out of the middle of our Chicago campaign. I was constantly in the position of urging Martin to focus our limited staff resources and resist the temptation to respond to every worthy cause.¹⁰⁷

Young and Lafayette begged him not to go to Memphis, citing his already packed schedule and the campaign's need for King himself to shore up its sometimes shaky support. The campaign's launch already had been delayed once to April 22, to coincide with the end of Congress' Easter recess, and King's itinerary for the rest of the month appeared daunting, taking him to towns across Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, as well as New York City, Newark, Baltimore, and Washington. He had just returned from a West Coast trip and had promised his new non-black partners that he would make more visits in the West, including to Indian reservations and migrant labor camps. But a weary King also was convinced that,

¹⁰⁷ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 449.

“Memphis is the Washington campaign in miniature.”¹⁰⁸ He was going whether his aides liked it or not.¹⁰⁹

King’s first trip to Memphis reaffirmed his decision. Overwhelmed by a packed house of roughly 15,000 at the Mason Temple in Memphis, an exhilarated King vowed to return and lead a march, which he did ten days later. But instead of demonstrating the strikers’ strength and a unified community, the King-led march ended in turmoil as impatient, disaffected youths smashed storefronts with protest placards stripped down to three-foot wooden clubs and police responded with overwhelming, often unnecessary force. Aides whisked King away to an upscale hotel out of the riot zone, which only added to the criticism that soon cascaded down on SCLC. Those already inclined to oppose the Poor People’s Campaign pounced on the chaos in Memphis, arguing that such unrest proved their suspicions all along – that SCLC could not prevent such violence from occurring in the nation’s capital – while even more sympathetic newspapers cast doubt on the campaign. “Small groups over whom the demonstration organizers have no control could and may well be planning to exploit things for their own selfish purposes,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. “The planned activities of Dr. King ... can only be negative in terms of accomplishing civil rights progress.”¹¹⁰ Not only did King clearly not have control over the marchers, critics

¹⁰⁸ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 458.

¹⁰⁹ “Dr. King Touring Nation in Poor People’s Campaign,” SCLC press release, March 17, 1968, Box 122, Folder 10, SCLC; *Washington Post*, March 5, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1968; *The (Columbia, S.C.) State*, March 23, 1968; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 451; and Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 718.

¹¹⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1968.

charged, he escaped the scene to what journalists called a “plush” hotel, a far cry from where his constituency lived. The *Commercial-Appeal* in Memphis even challenged his manhood, running an infamous editorial cartoon entitled “Chicken a-la-King” that showed the SCLC leader literally running away.¹¹¹

The violence in Memphis emboldened other critics, particularly those in the federal government. Viewing Memphis as an affirmation of his placement of King on the “agitator index,” FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover took the opportunity to ratchet up the agency’s surveillance of King’s organization, including a formal request for wiretaps of SCLC’s offices in Atlanta (which was denied by Attorney General Ramsey Clark). Meanwhile, congressional critics excoriated King and the upcoming campaign on the Senate floor. Leading the charge was West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, chair of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the District of Columbia. Calling Memphis “a preview of what may be in store” for Washington “if this self-seeking rabble-rouser is allowed to go through with his plans,” Byrd challenged his colleagues and the White House to do something: “It is time for our Federal Government – which in recent years has shown itself to be virtually spineless when it comes to standing up against the lawbreakers, the hoodlums, and the Marxist demonstrators – at least to let the nation know ... that it will not allow this Nobel Peace Prize winner to create another Memphis.”¹¹² Senator John Stennis, who made a career of

¹¹¹ Cartoon in *Commercial-Appeal*, March 31, 1968. Also, (Memphis) *Commercial-Appeal* and (Memphis) *Press-Scimitar*, March 29, 30, 31 and April 1, 2, 1968; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 605-606, 610-611. For more detailed accounts of the March 28 violence and the fatal police shooting of suspected looter Larry Payne, unarmed and 16 years old, see McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 53-63; and Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 730-734.

¹¹² N.P. Callahan FBI memo to Director, April 1, 1968.

wrapping southern white supremacy in a softer shell than his better known colleague James Eastland, suggested that marchers should be stopped at the city limits and allowed to send only a small delegation to the Capitol.¹¹³ Edward Brooke, the Senate's only African American member, echoed the concerns of more cautious black leaders like the NAACP's Roy Wilkins in questioning whether the march could remain nonviolent. Inside the White House, Cabinet members and presidential aides continued a sometimes heated debate over how to blunt the campaign, from blocking the campaign's park permit to reminding the public how much the administration had already accomplished for the poor.¹¹⁴

Unbeknownst to the many activists who had committed to the PPC, even King began to waver on the campaign's future, telling both Stanley Levison and Ralph Abernathy that he was thinking of calling it off. Abernathy recalled King saying, "Maybe we'll have to let violence run its course. Maybe people will listen to the voice of violence. They certainly won't listen to us."¹¹⁵ Neither man accepted such talk, arguing that it was King's exhaustion speaking. Despite his fatigue, King stayed up late the night of the Memphis violence, expressing a mix of frustration and resentment to a series of intimates, including Hosea Williams, Coretta Scott King, and Bernard Lee. In his conversations with Levison, he even toyed with the idea of fasting to prevent further violence, as César Chávez had earlier in the

¹¹³ For more on Stennis' approach to civil rights opposition, especially in contrast to Eastland, see Joseph H. Crespino, "Strategic Accommodation: Civil Rights Opponents in Mississippi and Their Impact on American Racial Politics, 1953-1972" (Ph.D. diss, Stanford University, 2003).

¹¹⁴ (Washington) *Evening Star*, March 29, 1968; *New York Times*, March 30, 1968; *U.S. News & World Report*, April 8, 1968; *Washington Daily News*, April 3, 1968; N.P. Callahan FBI memo to Director, April 1, 1968; and Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 403-404.

¹¹⁵ Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 420.

month – and, as a *New York Times* editorial stated the following day, Mahatma Gandhi had done in India.¹¹⁶

On March 29, a refreshed King became more encouraged by a productive meeting with Charles Cabbage and members of the gang suspected of starting the riot, and told the press that the Poor People’s Campaign was still on. But first, he would return to Memphis and lead, this time, an SCLC-organized march.¹¹⁷ Many of his closest aides did not agree with this decision, arguing that a return to Memphis meant canceling, or at least postponing, the PPC. An emergency strategy session turned into, at least for a while, a rehashing of earlier concerns about the campaign. Uncharacteristically, King exploded in anger and walked out, leaving Young, Abernathy, Levison, Lafayette and a few others to work out their differences and achieve a consensus plan to return to Memphis. Admittedly an early skeptic, Young concluded that another march *had* become essential: “Memphis had become a necessary stepping-stone to Washington and the successful launching of our Poor People's Campaign.”¹¹⁸

It remains unclear how close King actually came to canceling the Washington campaign. Two days later, on March 31, King hinted publicly that he would consider

¹¹⁶ SAC New York to FBI Director, March 29, 1968; *New York Times*, March 30, 1968; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 612.

¹¹⁷ Organizing its own march became a very important point to SCLC because the Invaders said they fueled the riots after their exclusion by James Lawson and local organizers in Memphis. King had trusted Lawson that such disunity would not be a problem; his disappointment with Lawson fueled at least some of King’s consternation. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 617.

¹¹⁸ Quote in Young, *An Easy Burden*, 457. Also, Levison and Alice Loewi, telephone conversation, March 31, 1968, and Levison and Adele Kanter, telephone conversation, April 1, 1968, Levison FBI file, KP; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 611-612.

canceling the campaign if President Johnson, who had just announced his intention not to run for re-election, wanted to negotiate. King added, however, that, “I don’t see that forthcoming.”¹¹⁹ Tom Offenburger, SCLC’s public relations director, said that the executive staff never seriously considered such a step; instead, staffers were mostly opposed to returning to Memphis. But what remains striking is that none of these discussions went beyond the confines of King’s inner circle, according to SCLC documents, FBI surveillance reports, and records of the other key participating organizations. Despite the numerous commitments in time, energy, and resources made by Chicano, welfare rights, and Appalachian activists to the PPC, neither King nor SCLC aides consulted them about the future of the campaign. Rather than consult the campaign steering committee or the Committee of 100, SCLC’s “junior partners” instead had to learn of the campaign’s status through the press. Such disregard for these grassroots activists would only worsen in the chaotic immediate aftermath of April 4.¹²⁰

* * *

When Kay Shannon first heard about King’s death, she and her colleagues at the Washington office of the PPC thought it was a cruel joke. Informed by an anonymous caller, she only believed it after talking to an SCLC representative in Atlanta – sparking a mix of tears and resentment among the staff members present. “The girl next to me, who was

¹¹⁹ *New York Times*, April 1, 1968.

¹²⁰ *Washington Post*, April 1, 1968; (Washington) *Evening Star*, April 1, 1968; and Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon. There is no indication in SCLC records, released FBI files, or the NWRO and Tijerina papers that King or his underlings tried to contact their partners in the PPC. These important discussions remained strictly in house.

black, started to cry and I put my arms around her because I was feeling the same way,” Shannon recalled. “She turned to me and she saw that I was white and she immediately turned away, and I had this ... ache because I knew that we were going to be confronted with that situation from then on.”¹²¹ Indeed, Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination threatened to disrupt whatever fragile alliances blacks and whites maintained, including those at the heart of the Poor People’s Campaign. Of course, the mistrust and rage of African Americans toward whites was nothing new, and neither was the violence; King’s death just compounded the problem. Every spring and summer had witnessed urban uprisings since Harlem in 1964 – and the deaths, arrests, and property damage that inevitably came with them. Although less deadly, post-assassination disorders touched 100 cities, including supposedly “riotproof” Washington, D.C., and were the most violent uprisings to occur simultaneously during the 1960s.¹²² Yet often lost in the shadow of King’s death and the subsequent violence was the Poor People’s Campaign, the dynamics of which changed permanently with King’s death. While scholars argue that his death doomed the campaign, the immediate response to the assassination suggests a more complicated outcome, even a window of opportunity.¹²³

¹²¹ Katherine Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles.

¹²² Government officials and elite journalists apparently believed that such uprisings could not happen in the nation’s capital. Gilbert et al, *Ten Blocks from the White House*, 1. Police estimated that thirty-eight people died during the post-assassination uprisings. *New York Times*, April 10, 1968.

¹²³ King scholars generally end the story with his death, perhaps including an epilogue that the campaign went forward, failed miserably, all because King was not present to keep the various factions in line. In turn, PPC scholars blame the campaign’s ineffectiveness indirectly on the death of King, because of the leadership vacuum it created. See Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*; Peter Ling, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, 297-301; Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*; McKnight, *The Last*

Hours after the assassination, Ralph Abernathy assured the press that “we are going to carry through on Dr. King’s last great dream – the poor people’s campaign,” sparking a phenomenal outpouring of help to SCLC offices.¹²⁴ “I noticed it a day or two after the assassination,” recalled James Edward Peterson. “The phone started ringing; we were sort of barricaded in the switchboard room. Tear gas was being thrown around and the white people were being told that they could leave. ... People started calling in, mostly black women in the suburbs.”¹²⁵ Kay Shannon echoed this memory: “[T]he phones started ringing and the black community started calling and saying, ‘We want to help, we want to help.’”¹²⁶

To that point, many African Americans in the nation’s capital had been wary of the campaign, driven by a combination of class politics, a fear of unrest, and skepticism of its success. To be sure, the campaign had some support in black Washington, ranging from prominent members of the Black United Front, such as Sterling Tucker and Julius Hobson, to faith leaders in the Interreligious Committee on Race Relations and the black D.C. Federation of Civic Organizations. Many other local black leaders, however, stood on the

Crusade; Chase, “Class Insurrection”; and Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*. Other scholars of the period, even if their periodizations differ slightly, also offer a similar perspective regarding King and the campaign’s potential – if they bothered to mention the campaign at all. Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, and *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality*; Sitkoff, *The Black Struggle for Equality*; Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*; William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; 1986); and Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America From Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹²⁴ Quote in *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1968. Abernathy reiterated the decision six days later. *New York Times*, April 11, 1968.

¹²⁵ James Edward Peterson, administrative assistant to the PPC’s national deputy coordinator, interview by Kay Shannon, July 3, 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

¹²⁶ Quote by Katherine Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles.

sidelines as white suburban liberals dominated early planning in the capital. Kay Shannon, who had been active in the peace movement through SANE and the United Nations Association, attended a packed meeting in mid-February at which she was surprised to see only two African Americans, one of them Tony Henry of the AFSC. Even after they signed on, the sincerity of many of the local black middle class volunteers seemed questionable at best. They “always wanted their name to be on the program,” recalled James Edward Peterson. “One particular person said, ‘It’s very important that my name appear on this paper, because it could mean a lot of money.’ What he wanted to do was really to show his friends that, you know, he was joining an organization to help the poor.”¹²⁷

Many such volunteers did prove more adept at supplying funds than anything else. Indeed, fundraising for the campaign nationally became easier after King’s death, a fact to which the Reverend James Hargett could attest. A key SCLC contact in Los Angeles and a United Church of Christ pastor, Hargett said donations jumped in his heavily middle class black congregation and among Hollywood celebrities. Celebrities from television stars Robert Culp and Lorne Greene to Marlon Brando, Jack Lemmon, and Barbra Streisand opened their wallets – as well as their mouths – in support of the campaign, including a highly publicized benefit at the Hollywood Bowl. As SCLC officials had learned during past campaigns, it was important to take advantage of such moments; the Birmingham campaign in 1963, for example, had produced substantial financial support, but only for a few months.

¹²⁷ Quote by James Edward Peterson, interview by Kay Shannon. Also, Lois Gray, “Black Community Report and Notes,” Box 10, AGP; Interreligious Committee on Race Relations, “A Message to the Religious Community in Greater Washington,” Box 2101, NWRO; *Washington Post*, February 24, 1968; *Evening Star*, March 13, 14, 16 and 20, 1968; *Washington Daily News*, February 21, 1968; and *New York Times*, May 17, 1968.

And the upsurge in fundraising proved well-timed, as SCLC records and FBI documents both demonstrate that King's organization suddenly did not have enough money to transport everyone to Washington who wanted to attend, especially from the West Coast.¹²⁸ Yet, if fundraising improved, recruitment would progress even more – a development even predicted by J. Edgar Hoover.¹²⁹

Although some confusion ensued in places like Mobile, Alabama, over the future of the PPC, SCLC officials in April and early May witnessed an upsurge first in the attention to King – in death – and then personal commitments to the campaign. “Everybody wanted to be a part of the Poor People's Campaign after Martin's death,” said Andrew Young. “The funeral was the same way. We would have thought that ten, fifteen thousand people coming to Martin's funeral would have been all we could handle. There were probably closer to a hundred thousand people, and yet we made it.”¹³⁰ Chicano newspapers made rousing and poetic tributes to King, several ethnic Mexicans including Tijerina and Gonzales were honored guests, and others such as Leo Nieto and José Gutiérrez, a fellow minister in Texas,

¹²⁸ Despite the initial spike in funds, Stanley Levison was particularly concerned with SCLC's long-term fundraising. He told Bill Rutherford that Abernathy's personality was as “ill-suited to the donors as you can possibly find.” Although true in many ways, Levison's comment proved symbolic of his disdain for Abernathy's leadership during the next several months. FBI memo, New York, New York, April 23, 1968.

¹²⁹ James Hargett, interview by author, August 5, 2005, Claremont, Calif.; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 20, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1968; FBI memo, Los Angeles, California, May 14, 1968; and Director J. Edgar Hoover to SAC Albany, April 5, 1968. Several celebrities, including producer Edward Lewis, director Robert Wise, actors Carl Reiner, Gene Kelly, Rod Steiger, and Shirley MacLaine, also formed a Hollywood Support Committee for the Poor People's Campaign to offer more systematic assistance.

¹³⁰ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 476. In fact, police estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people participated in King's funeral procession and services on April 9, 1968. *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1968.

even drove through the night – surviving a freak car accident with a bull – to witness the funeral procession. For Nieto, the hair-raising journey also cemented his commitment to the campaign.¹³¹

In fact, grassroots activists of all kinds, many disdainful of the campaign just days before, reconsidered participating. This included so-called militants interested in armed self-defense. For example, Lauren Watson, a Black Panther from Denver, initially viewed the PPC's strategy as a waste of time – not because of its inclusion of other ethnic groups but its emphasis on non-violent protest. Watson, an organizer of the October 1967 anti-war march on the Pentagon, had teamed up with Corky Gonzales' Crusade numerous times to protest the war and police brutality in a city where the ethnic Mexican population dwarfed that of African Americans. However, he believed that non-violence as a strategy had run its course and had begun to embrace an “any means necessary” approach to social justice. Only after attending King's funeral did Watson change his mind on the campaign: “I ... felt that as my personal tribute to Dr. King that I would go ahead and do it,” said Watson, whose approximately 50-person organization also joined forces with Crusade members and more moderate labor and political leaders to march on the Colorado capitol and demand civil rights legislation in King's name.¹³² His participation did not mean he was confident that the

¹³¹ Leo Nieto, “The Poor People's Campaign, 1968,” unpublished chapter, in author's possession; FBI memos, April 9, 1968, Mobile, Ala., Columbia, S.C., April 16, 1968, and Charlotte, N.C., April 16, 1968; SAC Denver to FBI Director, April 17, 1968; FBI memo, April 19, 1968, Denver; *Christian Science Monitor*, March 30, 1968; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; Leo Nieto, interview by author; and *El Gallo*, May 1968 (courtesy of Ernesto Vigil).

¹³² Lauren Watson, interview by author, June 27, 2005, Denver, Colo.

campaign would succeed, he said, but “there’s always room for (my) kind of thinking.”¹³³

Watson went on to take a leadership position in the campaign, using his extensive network among peace activists to recruit participants across the West, and then driving an SCLC car complete with radio-phone to guide the Western Caravan across the country.¹³⁴

Lauren Watson’s about-face was not an anomaly. Although the biggest names in Black Power did not jump on the bandwagon – Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissick, and H. Rap Brown – many of their followers eventually signed on to the campaign.¹³⁵ Members of the Black Panther Party were particularly well represented in caravans from the West, including San Francisco and Portland. Bobby Seale did not attend, but spearheaded a last-minute funding drive with local coordinator Sandra Davis to raise \$10,000 for the San Francisco caravan. Milwaukee’s NAACP Youth Council, which had become a leading radical voice for open housing, reconsidered advisor Father James Groppi’s advice to join the campaign and voted to participate. Los Angeles’ Black Congress, an umbrella organization for African American organizations in that city, endorsed the campaign and contributed troops. Perhaps most prominent was SCLC recruiters’ success in convincing

¹³³ *Denver Post*, April 30, 1968.

¹³⁴ Lauren Watson and Ernesto Vigil, both interviews by author, and Rudy and Gerry Gonzales, interview by author, June 27, 2005, Denver, Colo.; “Lauren Watson bio sheet,” Folder 1, Lauren Watson collection, Denver Public Library; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 29-30, 33-35.

¹³⁵ Organizations like SNCC were skeptical of the campaign’s success, but remained neutral in order for members to participate if they desired. “[W]e believe that those Black People who have accepted the non-violent technique and those who believe in demonstrations should participate in the Poor People’s Campaign. ... We hope that the Poor People’s Campaign accomplishes its goals, because it will make our work unnecessary,” said Lester McKinnie, director of the Washington, D.C., office of SNCC. “Black Newsletter” press release, n.d. [May-June 1968], reel 58, frame 0343, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee Papers, microfilm, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter known as SNCC).

gang members from several cities not only to attend the campaign but also to serve productively as Resurrection City marshals – an internal police force of sorts. A significant number participated, including the Blackstone Rangers, Egyptian Cobras, and Disciples, all from the Southside of Chicago; and the Commandos from Milwaukee, affiliated with that city’s NAACP Youth Council. Also agreeing to join were the Memphis Invaders and their leader, Charles Cabbage, who King before he died recognized as wanting to be included and respected more than anything else. These young men’s participation immediately prompted both media and conservative attacks, but generally positive reviews from SCLC officials – who characterized the marshals as raw yet respectful and well-meaning – foreshadowing that organization’s endorsement of Black Power in its August 1968 convention.¹³⁶

Even some of the campaign’s loudest detractors tempered their criticism, even if they did not sign on to the campaign. Both Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin, vocal critics of King’s plans in Washington, switched their positions after his death. Wilkins, who had called for the cancellation of the PPC just a day before the assassination, recognized the groundswell of support and eventually dropped his opposition; the NAACP in Washington offered its help with both legal assistance and the more mundane yet important contribution

¹³⁶ SAC Portland memo to FBI Director, May 20, 1968; SAC Milwaukee memo to FBI Director, April 9, 1968; FBI memos, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 23 and 30, 1968; *Milwaukee Journal*, April 28, 1968; FBI memo, Louisville, Kentucky, May 14, 1968; FBI Director memo to the President, May 12, 1968; John Rutherford, administrative coordinator of Resurrection City, interview by Kay Shannon, June 4, 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; Katherine Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles; and Willie Bolden, SCLC official and Mule Train “Wagonmaster,” interview by author, November 5, 2005, Atlanta, Ga.

of office supplies.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, Rustin offered to replicate his organization of a climactic rally at the Lincoln Memorial, as he had in 1963 – an offer SCLC accepted. Several newspapers once critical of the PPC also reconsidered the campaign’s wisdom and either offered tepid approval or at least refrained from criticism. In the immediate days afterward, the *Atlanta Constitution*’s editorial page, for instance, seemed to question its earlier condemnation “on the grounds that it could trigger violence. How mild that threat now seems in light of the disorders that have erupted in more than a hundred cities.” Calling the campaign “inevitable ... until Congress adopts an economic declaration of freedom,” the *Constitution* declared that, “[j]obs, housing, a chance for dignity ... are the goals now.”¹³⁸ The *Washington Post* came out in support of a march, but proposed changing its direction: “Let us have a march, by all means. But why not turn it around and have its route run from Washington to where the poverty is.”¹³⁹ Even the *Chicago Tribune*’s editorial page, long a sharp-tongued critic of King’s plans, remained silent in the weeks after his death – as did the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Editorial writers at black newspapers maintained a wait-and-see attitude, offering low-key endorsements or remaining silent on the Washington campaign.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ In June 1968, Wilkins and the national NAACP leadership weathered an attack by the organization’s “young turks,” who challenged, among other things, its commitment to the Poor People’s Campaign.

¹³⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1968. See also *Constitution* editorial pages on April 6 and 11, 1968.

¹³⁹ *Washington Post*, April 23, 1968.

¹⁴⁰ *Washington Daily News*, April 3, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1968; *New York Times*, April 9, 1968; and *New Amsterdam News*, April 20, 1968.

Of course, critics remained, particularly within the institution largely in the campaign's bulls-eye, Congress. While some support for the PPC and its vision existed in both parties, such as Republican Senators Edward Brooke and Charles Percy and Democratic presidential candidates Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, the most vocal congressional critics were southern Democrats with poor civil rights records. Led by Senators Robert Byrd of West Virginia, Russell Long of Louisiana, and John McClellan of Arkansas, Senate proceedings became venues for attacks on the campaign, hitting a crescendo a few days before and after a vanguard of campaign representatives visited Congress. Inflammatory remarks by Byrd and Long, praising "shoot-to-kill" policies to quell demonstrators and looters that got out of hand, or charges of communist influence were commonplace. In an angry tirade on the Senate floor based on FBI intelligence, McClellan charged that "militant advocates of violence" would infiltrate the campaign, information based upon an informant deemed unreliable by the FBI.¹⁴¹

Congressional committees also scheduled hearings on more than seventy-five bills designed to block the PPC. McClellan called one such hearing, in his Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, in the hopes of denying the PPC its desired location for Resurrection City. To permit the tent city to rise on government property suggested official sanction of the shantytown as spectacle as well as the risk of disorder and "mob rule," opponents argued, and thus the issue of park permits became an ongoing and central point of contention. But rather than receive assurances from administration officials, including

¹⁴¹ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 8, 1968; *Washington Post*, April 26 and 27, 1968; and *New York Times*, May 3, 7 and 8, 1968; and C.D. DeLoach FBI memos to Clyde Tolson, May 8 and 10, 1968.

Attorney General Ramsey Clark and Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, that such denials would continue, McClellan faced equivocation. Instead of the desired hard-line message, the hearings ended amid a mood of uncertainty as Senator Carl Mundt questioned the committee's legitimacy in setting security and permit rules and suggested that the Mall was the people's space. "I simply want to emphasize this because sometimes I get the idea that somehow or other we think that we are the custodians of this community, and it belongs to us and 'the public be damned,' " Mundt stated. "I don't think so at all. We are servants of the people. This is their home" too.¹⁴² Meanwhile, presidential aides boned up on Arthur Schlesinger's take on the 1932 Bonus Army march, in which Hoover and Congress looked obstinate. Concluded Matt Nimetz, "We can learn from their mistakes."¹⁴³ In early May, the National Park Service approved a thirty-seven-day renewable permit for the PPC to set up a camp of up to 3,000 people in West Potomac Park.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² U.S. Congress, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, *Conference on Problems Involved in the Poor Peoples' March on Washington, D.C.* 90th Cong., 2nd sess., April 25, 1968, 77.

¹⁴³ Matt Nimetz memo to Joe Califano, May 16, 1968, "Death of Martin Luther King & Subsequent Riots," Box 1, Legislative Background, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter known as LBJ). Nimetz passed around a nine-page excerpt to his colleagues. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 257-265.

¹⁴⁴ The deal struck by Department of Interior officials, members of Congress, and SCLC also included the construction of up to six Mississippi sharecropper shacks in front of the Smithsonian Institution, and the campaign's use of the Lincoln Memorial for mass meetings. The park permits, however, could be revoked "at any time" in the interests of security or if there were violations of the permit's language. National Park Service Regional Director Nash Castro letter to Bernard Lafayette, May 10, 1968, in "Death of Martin Luther King and Subsequent Riots," Box 1, Legislative Background, LBJ; *New York Times*, April 26 and May 3, 7, 8, and 11, 1968; and United States, *Conference on Problems*, 1-77.

Just as the striking sanitation workers discovered when public outcry over the assassination forced Memphis officials to negotiate a settlement favorable to the union, PPC officials realized Martin Luther King's death ironically may have given the campaign a new, much improved lease on life. Perhaps PPC organizers could parlay the massive goodwill created by King's death into an even larger victory for the nation's poor. At least momentarily, SCLC retained the ability both to raise substantial amounts of money and mobilize thousands of people for their cause. Yet linking these attributes coherently with grassroots strategies across the country remained a formidable test – even if many individuals had changed their minds and agreed to participate. Despite the real progress in reaching out to other minority groups in King's last days, SCLC still faced a series of obstacles, not the least among them the organization's penchant for high-handedness – or a peculiar form of paternalism. Thus, as Ralph Abernathy took the reins of SCLC and the PPC, trying to embrace new constituencies and build new alliances, King's grand vision challenged the way the organization handled itself as much as it challenged how the nation treated its most tread-upon citizens.

Chapter Three

Chicanos in the Capital: Interethnic Efforts, Intra-Ethnic Gains

*“When would we have gotten together with the Crusade? Lived with them?
Shared bread with them? Marched every day with them?”*

- Carlos Montes, one-time Brown Beret from Los Angeles ¹

Early in the morning of May 17, 1968, Gloria Arellanes boarded a chartered Greyhound bus at Will Rogers Memorial Park in South-Central Los Angeles, ready to make the nearly 3,000-mile journey to Washington, D.C. Arellanes, at age 19, had never been to the nation’s capital. She had met very few Chicana or Chicano activists outside of her immediate world in East Los Angeles and El Monte, California. She had heard about, but never seen anyone beaten by the police. Nor had she seen white people so poor that their children hardly had shoes. But this all began to change when she and her fellow Brown Berets – a Chicano youth organization from Los Angeles – heard about the vision Martin Luther King Jr. had for a new multiethnic alliance of the poor. Although they were recruited for the campaign only after King’s assassination, they responded with enthusiasm.²

For Arellanes, the few weeks that she spent among the poor and their allies in Washington became a turning point personally. “I always told people, I learned more about people on that march than ever. I saw so many things, and observed so many things,” she

¹ Carlos Montes, interview by author, August 8, 2005, Los Angeles, Calif.

² Gloria Arellanes, interview by author, November 9, 2006, El Monte, Calif.

recalled, it was an experience that changed her life permanently.³ At times, Arellanes witnessed the best of people – the kindness of “the most wonderful” African American hosts in St. Louis or the “singing, laughing,” and “festive kind of atmosphere” on the buses crossing the country. But she also saw the worst, from a black woman “clutching her daughter with ... fear in her eyes” during a bomb threat in El Paso to the hypocrisy of a Chicano leader “trying to live like a king” by eating steak while everyone else ate canned rice and beans. All were invaluable lessons that she took home and helped her become an increasingly sophisticated member of the Chicano movement, in large part due to the folks that she met on the way to or in Washington, with whom she ate, stood in line, and demonstrated. From land rights activists and students from New Mexico and Texas to Corky Gonzales and the Denver-based Crusade for Justice, Chicano participants in the campaign earned her respect and affection – and inspired her emergence as a leader, first in the Brown Berets and more generally as a leading voice of Chicana feminist nationalism.⁴

Gloria Arellanes’ experience during the Poor People’s Campaign was not unusual. Whether they went for months, weeks, or just a day or two, many marchers left Washington enlightened, if not transformed. While scholars of the black freedom struggle either conflate the Poor People’s Campaign with King’s death or see its shortcomings as confirmation of their theory of a leadership vacuum left by King, historians of the Chicano movement often

³ Gloria Arellanes, interview by author.

⁴ Gloria Arellanes, interview by author. Dionne Espinosa distinguishes between Arellanes’ feminist nationalism as a Chicana and the feminism of middle class white women. Espinosa, “‘Revolutionary Sisters’: Women’s Solidarity and Collective Identification Among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles, 1967-1970,” *Aztlán* 26 (2001): 17-58.

treat the PPC as nothing more than a momentary distraction for activists before they returned to the business of movement-building. At best, these scholars view the campaign as an attempt by Reies Tijerina, Corky Gonzales, and other movement leaders to widen national awareness of the Chicano struggle by voicing their concerns in front of the Washington press corps and the rest of the East Coast-centric establishment media.⁵ But it remains highly questionable whether Chicano activists received the national exposure that they had hoped to achieve. As will be discussed in depth in Chapter Five, analysis of media coverage of the PPC strongly suggests that, despite a few isolated articles and television segments by national media organizations, journalists generally framed the campaign as they had in past flashpoints of the freedom struggle – as a black civil rights campaign pitting African Americans versus whites, militants versus moderates, protesters versus the power structure. Nor did Chicano activists achieve their officially stated priorities in the campaign – particularly U.S. recognition of their claims to land grants dating to the mid-nineteenth century.

⁵ Also, in contrast to movement historians, scholars of the ethnic Mexican experience in the United States generally do not label the campaign as a failure, but rarely do they offer the PPC more than a passing mention. See Acuña, *Occupied America*, 370-1; Oropeza, *¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No!*, 73-74; García, *Memories of Chicano History*, 216; Gómez-Quíñones, *Chicano Politics*, 114-115; Gutiérrez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant*, 221; Carlos Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (London: Verso, 1989), 66; and Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 26, 39-40, 153. The only exceptions are Ernesto Vigil's book on the Crusade for Justice and George Mariscal's study of the Chicano Movement's "lessons." Vigil's study, which devotes a short chapter on the campaign mostly reliant on FBI surveillance files, contends that the campaign at least helped publicize the Chicano movement outside of the Southwest. Mariscal, who devotes a lengthy chapter to black-brown relations more generally, portrays the PPC as a failure that proved "destructive" to future alliances. Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 54-63; and Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, 196-200.

Rather, the campaign had arguably a more important role in the lives of individual activists. For two months during the height of the campaign, people of Mexican descent – such as Gloria Arellanes and fellow Brown Berets Carlos Montes and Ralph Ramirez – lived and interacted daily with African Americans, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, poor whites, and each other. This chapter will argue that this experience became a key building block for the burgeoning Chicano movement, increasing its sophistication and strength by building and deepening relationships among activists. Not only did it empower individuals and complicate activists’ own analyses, but the campaign experience also strengthened intra-regional networks. In addition, the campaign placed the ongoing tensions between rural and urban Chicano activists in sharp relief, especially the role of Reies López Tijerina’s leadership. By the campaign’s end, Tijerina’s status among his peers had declined considerably. Instead of a moment of triumph for the land rights leader, Tijerina’s marginalization bolstered the organizing of Corky Gonzales and others and helped set the table for the intra-ethnic cooperation that sustained the Chicano movement in the following years.

* * *

By the end of the campaign’s Washington phase, approximately 500 ethnic Mexicans had made the long journey to Washington – despite the challenging logistics of getting off work, moving their families, or traveling across the country for the first time.⁶ What did

⁶ The number is based on a variety of sources because estimates of PPC participants range widely. Past scholars, using press and FBI reports, estimate that Resurrection City had, at its peak, nearly 3,000 residents, while at least 50,000 showed up for the Solidarity Day rally. But only one historian attempts to break the numbers down by ethnicity and race, and he often relies upon overly optimistic

ethnic Mexicans hope to achieve by traversing the country on uncomfortable, often-ramshackle buses, pitching tents on the Washington Mall for weeks, and lobbying a recalcitrant federal government to pay more attention to the country's neediest? Did they share enough objectives with their African American counterparts, particularly in the SCLC? Did they believe in the promise of a grand alliance of the poor? Or did it come down to more tactical thinking, recognizing, for instance, the prestige of Martin Luther King Jr. and the value of nurturing a relationship with the most prominent civil rights activist of the day? Just as activists constructed poverty and its solutions in a variety of ways, those ethnic Mexicans who went to Washington had myriad motives for participating as well.⁷

Although Martin Luther King Jr. had experienced some decline in standing and influence among liberal politicians, Black Power advocates, and grassroots organizers by 1968, he still garnered a deep amount of respect among both activists and the general public.

SCLC reports, one of which suggested that nearly 1,000 ethnic Mexicans participated. Press reports are more skeptical, suggesting that 400 or 500 ethnic Mexicans came to Washington. Given the chaotic scene of Resurrection City and the last days of the campaign, such statistics should be scrutinized greatly. Yet another estimate of roughly 300 ethnic Mexicans comes from a demographic study by Albert Gollin, a sociologist, public opinion researcher, and chair of the PPC's General Administration and Services Committee. Completed for the federal Bureau of Social Science Research, the study drew several conclusions about the campaign's demography based upon systematic registration of participants through the caravans and a booth at Resurrection City. Yet even this study came with many caveats, warns its author, such as its failures to include most participants of one-day delegations – to differentiate between those most committed and those just passing through – and to take into account attrition on the caravans. Gollin, *The Demography of Protest: A Statistical Profile of Participants in the Poor People Campaign* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Social Science Research, 1968), 2-3; *New York Times*, March 31, 1968; Tom Houck memo to William Rutherford, April 20, 1968, Box 177, Folder 20, SCLC; *New York Times*, May 26 and 28, 1968; *Albuquerque Journal*, May 10 and June 3, 1968; *Denver Post*, May 16 and 20, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 27, 1968; and FBI memo, Albuquerque, May 14, 1968.

⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of the participation of poor whites, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians, see Chapter Four.

Surveys from the time continued to demonstrate that Americans in general admired King. And despite the powerful, competing messages of armed self-defense, black capitalism, as well as accommodation, large majorities of African-Americans still found King to be the person who “most fights for what people want” and who can be “trusted” to the greatest degree.⁸ The press, although more skeptical of his message and motives, especially since his stepped-up criticism of U.S. policy in Vietnam, still deemed his actions and words as high-profile news, if not always worthy of the front page.⁹ According to writer Jose Yglesias:

Despite their put-down tone about King and their wariness about his proposals, young blacks do not ignore him. They have not written him off, as have white theorists of the black movement in the last year. Young people recognize in him that courage they demand of themselves, just as white Southerners, conversely, still hate and fear him despite their surprised respect for him.¹⁰

Even black youth when polled in February 1968 preferred King over the eloquent firebrand Stokely Carmichael.¹¹ Thus, King brought a certain level of legitimacy with him – a

⁸ In a poll commissioned by *Fortune* magazine and conducted while King formulated the PPC in the fall, eighty-three and eighty-two percent of African-Americans, respectively, agreed with the above statements. Not surprisingly, the SCLC was quick to publicize these numbers. *Fortune*, January 1968; and “SCLC’s Dr. King Ranked by Negroes as Most Influential Leader” press release, January 9, 1968, Box 122, Folder 9, SCLC. He also received an honorable mention on the Gallup Poll’s annual “Most Admired” list. *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1968.

⁹ Of the major mainstream daily newspapers, only the *Washington Post* consistently placed King and news of the Poor People’s Campaign on the front page between August 1967 and March 1968 – because of the city’s central role in the upcoming campaign. See *Washington Post*, August 16 and October 24, 1967, and January 17, February 7, 8 and 24, and March 5, 1968. In contrast, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* generally ran such news inside, with a few exceptions. For front-page coverage, see *Los Angeles Times*, October 24 and December 6, 1967, and *New York Times*, August 16 and December 5, 1967.

¹⁰ José Yglesias, “It May Be A Long, Hot Spring in the Capital,” March 31, 1968.

¹¹ *Chicago Defender*, February 17-23, 1968.

phenomenon recognized by leaders of the Chicano movement trying to gain traction on the national stage.

Never “asleep,” as some ill-informed media and early historical accounts have suggested, ethnic Mexican activism had seen ebbs and flows throughout the twentieth century.¹² Just like with any social justice movement, it often remains difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint the movement’s beginning – or for that matter, its end.

Organizations, ideas, and individuals flow into each other, building upon and taking from the lessons taught by their predecessors. Just as an organizing tradition existed in the South long before SNCC activists showed up in the early 1960s, the young Chicano activists built on the actions of their predecessors. They included the zoot suit-wearing *pachucos* of Los Angeles, the youthful college activists of the Mexican American Movement (MAM), and the labor-oriented participants of El Congreso – all of whom helped develop a more prominent Mexican American identity at the end of the Great Depression and during World War II.¹³

As domestic anti-communism intensified in the 1950s, radical organizations faded or, in the case of the Community Service Organization, survived by growing more and more

¹² *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1963, June 8, 1967, and March 14, 1968; Manuel P. Servín, *The Mexican-Americans: An Awakening Minority* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Glencoe Press, 1970); John Haddox, *Los Chicanos: An Awakening People* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, 1970); and John Howard, *Awakening Minorities: American Indians, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970).

¹³ The Mexican American Movement, an outgrowth of the Young Men’s Christian Association, has often been dismissed as mostly assimilationist, not unlike LULAC and the American GI Forum. But both scholars Armando Navarro and Rodolfo Acuña argue, respectively, that the organization held greater importance, if only because MAM was a model of sorts for youth participation and that MAM facilitated the politicization of activist-scholar Ernesto Galarza. Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization*, 48-51; and Acuña, *Occupied America*, 255. I agree with Acuña that MAM deserves more scholarly attention. For more on the Zoot Suit Riots and El Congreso, see Chapter One.

conservative. Only the most mainstream ethnic Mexican political organizations managed to flourish, including the American GI Forum in Texas, founded to serve ethnic Mexican veterans of World War II, and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) in California, designed to elect more ethnic Mexicans to public office. Much like their Texas counterpart founded in 1929, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), these organizations partially modeled themselves after the NAACP, as membership organizations most interested in stressing legalistic means to combat discrimination and to encourage voting rights and registration.¹⁴

Not until the mid-1960s, amid Americans' growing protests against the Vietnam War and for free speech and civil rights, did a new generation of Chicano activists offer a sharper, more vocal critique of American society and the so-called "Mexican-American" generation they often saw as a champion of whiteness and assimilation.¹⁵ This tougher critique first emerged through the movement culture developed by the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) under César Chávez and Dolores Huerta in the fields of central California. Calling growers' labor practices both unsafe and unjust, NFWA and the predominantly Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee struck in 1965 after years of organizing. But as Zaragosa Vargas suggests, "Labor rights *are* civil rights."¹⁶ The

¹⁴ For more on these organizations, see Chapter One, especially footnotes 50-57. Other mainstream political groups of the time included the Viva Kennedy clubs and the Southwest Council of La Raza. See Ignacio M. García, *Viva Kennedy: Mexican Americans in Search of Camelot* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ For the coining of this somewhat misleading generational moniker, see García, *Mexican Americans*, 1-2.

¹⁶ Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights*, 252.

NFWA – later renamed the United Farm Workers – was as much a movement as it was a union. Using non-violent strategy from picketing to fasting, as well as popular consumer boycotts of grapes, Chávez and NFWA developed a national following and made the union leader the most well-known ethnic Mexican in the United States. Yet as recognizable a symbol as the farm worker struggle was, the Chicano movement included many strains and activists completely unrelated to farm labor or unionization. On the community level, a unique Chicano critique based upon a *mestizo* identity and culture, one often connected to the land, began to manifest itself in many ways, through a variety of organizations and locales across not just the Southwest, but the entire country.¹⁷

One of those organizations that captured the imagination of young Chicano activists was the Alianza Federal de Mercedes, founded by Reies López Tijerina in 1963. Tijerina, a Texas native and itinerant Pentecostal minister prone to vivid religious visions, discovered the century-old issue of Spanish and Mexican land grants in northern New Mexico in the 1950s. After a short-lived attempt to establish a religious commune in rural Arizona, Tijerina became a fugitive from the law and began to research the issue as the embodiment of a Bible-dictated commandment to serve the poor. During the next several years while on the lam, Tijerina researched the history of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in archives and with land grant descendants in the Southwest and Mexico, and he became convinced that the Mexican owners of land grants when the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-1848 ended

¹⁷ Patrick H. Mooney and Theo J. Majka, *Farmers' and Farm Workers' Movements: Social Protest in American Agriculture* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), Chapter 6.

gradually lost their property in violation of the treaty.¹⁸ In 1963, Tijerina founded the Alianza in Albuquerque, modeling it after the much older Abiquiú Corporation, a small, secretive New Mexico organization dedicated to land rights litigation. He reportedly also borrowed organizational ideas from the Nation of Islam's Elijah Muhammad, whom he met for a week in 1961. Alianza quickly became viable as it attracted thousands of mostly rural ethnic Mexican members and expanded land rights organizing beyond litigation to include a letter-writing and public awareness campaign – and eventually the direct action protests that brought the organization national attention.¹⁹

For Tijerina, the land grants struggle spoke to an almost obsessive need to please God and a strong belief that he was somehow anointed to lead the charge, based on his periodic messianic visions. But it was also a struggle that animated ethnic Mexicans who lived throughout the territory ceded to the United States in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe

¹⁸ One-third of U.S. territory, from the Northern Rockies and the Pacific Northwest to Texas and the Southwest, was once Mexico before the war. There is a rich literature on the conflicts over land grants in the Southwest, from the clashing of legal and economic cultures to the Mexican vigilante efforts of *Las Gorras Blancas* (the White Caps) and *Mano Negra* (Black Hand). More than 150 years after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, such disputes continue to show up in courtrooms. María E. Montoya, *Translating Property: The Maxwell Land Grant and the Conflict over Land in the American West, 1840-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Malcolm Ebright, *Land Grants and Lawsuits in Northern New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1994); Charles L. Briggs and John R. Van Ness, eds., *Land, Water, and Culture: New Perspectives on Hispanic Land Grants* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987); William Keleher, *Maxwell Land Grant: A New Mexico Item* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984); G. Emlen Hall, *Four Leagues of Pecos: A Legal History of the Pecos Grant, 1800-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1984); Morris F. Taylor, *O.P. McMains and the Maxwell Land Grant Conflict* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979); Robert Rosenbaum, *Mexicano Resistance in the Southwest: The Sacred Right of Self-Preservation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Andrew B. Schlesinger, "Las Blancas Gorras, 1889-1891," *Journal of Mexican American History* 1:2 (1971): 87-143; and Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Notes on Alianza formation, February 2, 1963, and (Albuquerque) *North Valley News*, August 27, 1964, both in Box 1, Folder 1, RLT; and Busto, *King Tiger*, 35-58.

Hidalgo, following the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-1848. This land became known to activists as Aztlán, referring to the mythical place of origin of the pre-Columbian Aztec people. It represented many things to ethnic Mexicans, from an identity independent of European influence to a culture of economic independence based upon herding, weaving, and communal property. The loss of that land not only translated into a decline in wealth but also endangered a cherished way of life. Despite being a charismatic preacher far more than an organizer, Tijerina managed to harness the longstanding bitterness regarding the land grants and, in the words of José Angel Gutiérrez, became the “first architect of Aztlán” who “did what Malcolm X and the Black Panthers only talked about,” by artfully creating a vision of Chicano activists’ mythic home through literal land possession, citizen’s arrests of top officials, early multiethnic coalition-building, and internationalization of Chicano politics.²⁰

Tijerina’s larger story, however, has been overshadowed by the courthouse raid in Tierra Amarilla, in which Alianza members determined to issue a citizen’s arrest of the local district attorney instead shot the jailer. Even though little evidence suggests that Tijerina knew about the raid beforehand, the event made him a hero to some and a pariah to others, as described in Chapter Two. Already someone who used bold rhetoric and spectacle to inspire others, Tijerina embraced the criticism of one-time allies such as U.S. Senator Joseph Montoya of New Mexico to fashion himself into a martyr – and was successful at it for a time. Yet this maneuver also resulted in him becoming a caricature in much of the public eye – depicted either as a fundamentalist kook or a courageous spokesman for the little

²⁰ Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, xvi-xvii. See also Acuña, *Occupied America*, 14-15.

man.²¹ More likely, Tijerina fell somewhere in between as early biographer Richard Gardner tried to capture: “He was a man of contradictions, with myriad flaws and failings and a number of hidden conflicts. But ... beneath the tangle of contradictions there was a pattern ... a central core of compulsive determination.”²² This combination made him arguably the most controversial of Chicano movement leaders.

A year after Tijerina founded the Alianza, Corky Gonzales and other ethnic Mexicans in Denver, concerned over repeated cases of police brutality, accounts of educational discrimination, and other civil rights violations, formed Los Voluntarios. Gonzales, a former boxer and bail bondsman had been a rising star within Colorado’s Democratic Party, heading up the state’s 1960 Viva Kennedy effort, running for local office several times – including a narrow loss to the city’s only African American councilman – directing the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and in 1965 being tapped as chairman of Denver’s War on Poverty Inc. Designed to advocate for Spanish-speaking people in Denver, Los Voluntarios portrayed itself as strictly reformist, reflected in the organization’s mission statement to “not only inform, but advise the public on political issues, educational advantages, social acceptance.”²³ Yet Gonzales, despite his ties to establishment Democrats, was known as an outspoken maverick with strong support among the ethnic Mexican

²¹ While most contemporary coverage of Tijerina was quite negative, scholars and biographers are often too sympathetic to Tijerina, glossing over his contradictions. See Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*; Busto, *King Tiger*; Nabokov, *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid*; Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants*; Acuña, *Occupied America*, 369; and Gómez-Quíñones, *Chicano Politics*, 115-118.

²² Gardner, *¡Grito!*, 256-257.

²³ *Viva!*, May 20, 1964.

community in Denver. “I’m an agitator and a trouble-maker. That’s my reputation,” Gonzales said at the time. “They didn’t buy me when they put me in (the War on Poverty) job.”²⁴

This became clear when the local *Rocky Mountain News* made unsubstantiated charges that Gonzales exhibited undue favoritism toward ethnic Mexicans in 1966. He organized a boycott and picketing around the newspaper’s building, an action which Mayor Tom Currigan then cited when he fired Gonzales. Members of Los Voluntarios staged another rally to protest the dismissal, and Gonzales declared that it was only the beginning of “a crusade for justice.” Over the next year, Los Voluntarios morphed into a new, more radical self-defense organization called the Crusade for Justice – one that rejected mainstream politics and blended the needs of urban ethnic Mexicans with the cultural rhetoric of Aztlán and an invigorated Chicano identity.²⁵

While slightly older men in their thirties founded the Alianza and Crusade, students also played an important role in the largest ethnic Mexican barrios in the country. In Texas and southern California, often first-generation college students, the children of immigrants, in many ways became the face of the movement. Inspired by the farm workers’ demonstration of unity and identity in action, students such as Carlos Montes and José

²⁴ Quote in *Rocky Mountain News*, September 29, 1965. See also Gerry and Rudy Gonzales, Corky Gonzales’ wife and son, interview by author, June 26, 2005, Denver, Colo.; *Viva!*, May 20, 1964; “Crusade for Justice newsletter, May 1966, Box 3, “Prison info,” RCG; Antonio Esquibel, ed., *Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2001), xxii-xxiv; and Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 20-26.

²⁵ *Rocky Mountain News*, April 21 and August 5, 1966; *Crusade for Justice Newsletter*, May 1966, Box 3, “Prison Info,” RCG; and Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 26-27.

Angel Gutiérrez sought ways to challenge the status quo: first in the educational system and then in the community as a whole. Alienated by the older more conservative leadership of LULAC, the American GI Forum, and the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASSO) in Texas, a cadre of students at St. Mary's College in San Antonio including Gutiérrez founded the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) in 1967. Several years in the making and heavily influenced by the successes and lessons of black civil rights organizations like SNCC, SCLC, and the Black Panthers, MAYO served as a vehicle not only for Chicano youth to criticize the white-dominated educational system, but also as a way to develop a greater Chicano political consciousness. "Both LULAC and the American GI Forum held themselves to be nonpolitical, and we thought that was absurd," writes Gutiérrez. "The impact of politics on Chicano life was everywhere. ... The thought of these organizations dividing our community on the basis of assimilation, culture, citizenship and class status in addition to age and gender for membership was abhorrent to us."²⁶ MAYO chapters soon spread across the Southwest, offering rhetorical and organizational support to direct action protests and an important foundation to a future all-Chicano party called La Raza Unida.²⁷

Ethnic Mexican experiences in Texas and California certainly were different, at least partly a reflection of Texas' more codified racial caste system. But by 1967, youth at both the high school and college levels in California also brought an education-centered critique

²⁶ Gutiérrez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant*, 100.

²⁷ Gutiérrez, *Making of a Chicano Militant*, 99-110; Acuña, *Occupied America*, 359-361; and Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization*, 80-114. See also Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power*.

to the forefront of ethnic Mexican activism. In the Los Angeles area, students formed several organizations, including the Mexican American Student Association (MASA) at East Los Angeles Community College, the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) at Loyola University, and the Episcopal church-affiliated Young Citizens for Community Action (YCCA), which was one small-scale response by city elites to the 1965 Watts rebellion. The students in YCCA offered a mostly reformist agenda at first – at the heart of their critique was the negative treatment and lack of recognition of Mexicans in U.S. history books; rules against speaking Spanish in classes and interethnic dating with whites; and an overall school system that ignored Mexican culture and identity. As students such as Vicki Castro began to work in electoral politics and in the community, however, their ethnic pride also increased, leading to a name change (with the same initials) to Young Chicanos for Community Action. With the help of Episcopal priest John Luce, the YCCA opened La Piranya coffeehouse, which quickly became a magnet for Chicano youth culture in East Los Angeles. La Piranya offered a mix of education, politics, and entertainment. Afternoons that started with a visit by a Chicano leader such as César Chávez, or a representative from another community organization, ended with an evening jazz set by a multiethnic band. Ralph Ramirez recalled La Piranya as where one could find East Los Angeles' vibrant black-infused jazz and rock scene, as well as visiting Black Panthers and other prominent Black Power activists like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown.²⁸

²⁸ Ralph Ramirez, interview by author, September 11, 2005, by telephone; *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1969; Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!*, 43-45; and Acuña, *Occupied America*, 360-361.

Such activities also attracted Los Angeles sheriff's deputies, who constantly harassed patrons of the coffeehouse, arresting them for minor infractions and placing the small storefront under near-constant surveillance.²⁹ Frustrated by the police harassment, David Sánchez and younger activists in YCCA who had succeeded Vicki Castro and the original leadership slowly moved the organization toward a more militant stance. Donning military-style khaki clothing and their trademark berets in January 1968, the newly named Brown Berets embraced a tone not unlike that of their Black Power counterparts, calling for "brown power" and armed self-defense in ethnic Mexican neighborhoods. Also, similar to the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets spearheaded the establishment of a free health clinic in East Los Angeles. In March 1968, as Chicano high school students leveled the same criticism against the school system as their predecessors had, the Brown Berets played an "advisory" role in what became known as the "blowouts," in which more than one thousand ethnic Mexican students and at least dozens of black and Asian sympathizers walked out of five area high schools.³⁰

Chicano activism also emerged in pockets of the Midwest, usually the result of farm and industrial laborers that migrated there but did not have the resources to return home. In Wisconsin in 1966, Jesus and Manuel Salas, originally from Crystal City, Texas, led a ninety-

²⁹ Ironically, the coffeehouse sat next to an office of the California highway patrol, but it was the sheriff's deputies that gave the students the most trouble. Ralph Ramirez, interview by author.

³⁰ Ralph Ramirez, Carlos Montes, and Gloria Arellanes, interviews by author; *La Raza*, January 15, 1968; *Chicano Student*, April 25 and May 18, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, March 7 and 17, 1968, and June 16, 1969; Henry J. Gutiérrez, "Racial Politics in Los Angeles: Black and Mexican American Challenges to Unequal Education in the 1960s," *Southern California Quarterly* 78 (1996): 51-86; and Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!*, 45-48.

mile march of farm workers to the state capital to demand a higher minimum wage and better labor laws. The Salas brothers then founded Obreros Unidos (United Workers) in Wautoma and eventually aligned with the United Farm Workers. A year later, ethnic Mexicans began to transform the community action program in Milwaukee, making it more responsive to their community. Similarly in northwest Ohio, Baldemar Velásquez founded the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) to improve labor conditions and wages for the predominantly ethnic Mexican workers harvesting tomatoes and sugar beets. A native of Texas, Velásquez had seen how his own family had been treated as migrant workers and the need for a migrant advocacy organization. “It was the heyday of the civil rights movement,” he recalled, “and I said, look, if African Americans can do this, we can do this for ourselves as well.”³¹ Velásquez visited both Texas and Wisconsin, eventually using Obreros Unidos as a model. In Chicago, Obed Lopez started the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO) after the Division Street uprisings in 1966. With both ethnic Mexican and Puerto Rican members, LADO emphasized welfare rights, fair housing, and opposition to urban renewal. It also published a newspaper as part of the Chicano Press Association.³²

³¹ Baldemar Velásquez, interview by author.

³² Marc S. Rodriguez, “Migrants and Citizens: Mexican American Migrant Workers and the War on Poverty in an American City,” in *Repositioning North American Migration History: New Directions in Modern Continental Migration, Citizenship, and Community*, ed. Marc S. Rodriguez (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 328-351; Rene Perez Rosenbaum, “Unionization of Tomato Field Workers in Northwest Ohio, 1967-1969,” *Labor History* 35 (Summer 1994): 329-344; Baldemar Velásquez, interview by author; and Obed Lopez, interview by author. See also Ricardo Parra, Victor Rios, and Armando Gutiérrez, “Chicano Organizations in the Midwest: Past, Present and Possibilities,” *Aztlán* 7 (1978): 235-253.

By early 1968 a genuine movement among a wide array of ethnic Mexicans seemed to be developing. Yet, in the eyes of many of its adherents, including Corky Gonzales, the Chicano movement remained fractured, particularly along urban and rural lines, and relatively isolated in the Southwest and Midwest. To the political establishment that dominated media coverage and federal policy, Chicanos remained nearly invisible. President Johnson had started to reach out to those ethnic Mexicans who called for minor legal reforms and supported the Vietnam War, most visibly through the administration-sponsored El Paso conference in October 1967. Although designed to highlight the administration's concern for ethnic Mexican interests, the conference instead demonstrated Johnson's disregard for some of their biggest concerns by snubbing Tijerina, Gonzales, Chávez, and representatives of the local El Paso Federation of Spanish-Speaking People.³³ As a result, Gonzales began to consider seriously a conference in which Chicano activists from across the country would come to a central location, such as Denver, to meet, hash out ideas, and build bonds in order to construct a more truly national movement. After receiving King's invitation to Washington, Gonzales decided to delay such an event, in order to go to the

³³ The decision not to invite so-called militant leaders to the conference, officially called the Cabinet Committee Hearings on Mexican American Affairs, backfired as other more mainstream organizations declined to attend in protest. For example, MAPA's board voted to boycott the conference, 58-5, as did the Latin American Civic Association. Meanwhile, Tijerina and Gonzales led a protest outside the conference and then held a "rump conference" to discuss what to do next. *Carta Editorial*, October 24, 1967, in Box 42, Folder 1, RLT; and *People's World*, November 11, 1967. See also Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 42-43; and Julie Leininger Pycior, *LBJ & Mexican Americans: The Paradox of Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 207-214. Craig Kaplowitz also sheds light on the narrow, yet still important, efforts made by more reform-minded ethnic Mexicans – particularly on voting rights, bilingual education, and greater ethnic diversity in high government policy positions. *LULAC: Mexican Americans and National Policy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

nation's capital with thousands of other poor people and their allies. Perhaps there, Gonzales believed, fruitful contacts could be made with their black counterparts, other Chicano activists, or maybe even sympathetic members of the white power structure, be they journalists or public officials. Either way, Gonzales also believed that, "The real work, building bases of power, would remain when the activists returned."³⁴

For the embattled Reies Tijerina, the Poor People's Campaign brought not just the chance to trumpet the land rights issue, but also the opportunity to bolster his personal legitimacy amid legal troubles stemming from the Tierra Amarilla raid. "The more I was accepted by the world as a voice of the oppressed people of the United States, the more that (U.S. Senator Joseph) Montoya's bosses became irked," Tijerina said, referring to the white supporters of New Mexico's Mexican-American senator. "Anglos in power in the United States did not want me to be seen next to King."³⁵ This certainly seems true, as Bob Brown, editor of the *Albuquerque Journal* and longtime nemesis of Tijerina's, called him the "wrong choice" who was "almost certain to lessen the prospects that the march will be a nonviolent one."³⁶ The local archbishop and LULAC chapter also criticized the choice of Tijerina,

³⁴ Quote in Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 56. Nita Jo Gonzales, interview by author, June 27, 2005, Denver; Ernesto Vigil, interview by author, December 10, 2005, by telephone; Gerry Gonzales and Rudy Gonzales, interview by author; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 56, 63.

³⁵ Quote in Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 102, 104. See also *Washington Post*, June 4, 1968; and Roque Garcia, Alianza member, interview by author, August 17, 2005, by telephone.

³⁶ *Albuquerque Journal*, April 26, 1968. Interestingly, newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* remained mostly silent about Tijerina's willingness to employ the rhetoric of armed self-defense – yet another reflection of the national media's marginalization of the campaign's Chicano activists.

although both supported the campaign's "intent."³⁷ Even the SCLC had qualms about recruiting Tijerina because of his perceived embrace of violent rhetoric in the wake of the courthouse raid. In the end, King and his associates chose Tijerina, because they believed they "would give him the kind of support that he felt he was not alone," said Bernard Lafayette. "And he was a clergyman as well. That might help him to be responsive to nonviolence."³⁸ Therefore, for a few of the most prominent Chicano activists, joining the Poor People's Campaign was just as much about tactics and national exposure as it was a shared ideology about class and poverty in America.

This does not necessarily explain, however, the participation of hundreds of other ethnic Mexicans who went to Washington. Indeed, scholars and journalists rarely have delved beyond the words of the most prominent organizers of the PPC to attempt to understand the campaign's attraction to the rank and file. One *Washington Post* story cited several regular people, such as Chicago coal handler Dempsey Price, who said, "I'm here because I'm 59 years old and there are people who still call me 'boy.'" Added Zola Petty of Memphis, "We want people to look – and then feel ashamed in their big houses and big cars ... sitting in fancy offices without doing a decent day's work."³⁹ Or as Mahalia Keys simply put it, "For better!"⁴⁰ Yet these efforts captured almost exclusively the voices of African Americans or the occasional white. The voices of ethnic Mexicans remain missing.

³⁷ *Albuquerque Tribune*, May 11, 1968, in Box 61, Folder 7, RLT.

³⁸ Bernard Lafayette, interview by author.

³⁹ *Washington Post*, May 24, 1968.

⁴⁰ Keys' application for PPC, Box 180, Folder 21, SCLC; and Chase, "Class Resurrection."

As a result, scholars allow Tijerina and Gonzales to speak for all ethnic Mexican participants. But if one goes beyond their voices, ethnic Mexican reasons for participation reflect the diversity of opinions demonstrated during the Minority Group Conference. Just as definitions of poverty and solutions to poverty ranged widely, those who went to Washington viewed the campaign as the fulfillment of a variety of dreams and goals, from improving their own station in life to putting democracy into action to witnessing the shutdown of the nation's capital. For instance, the Reverend Leo Nieto, a young Methodist minister with the Migrant Ministry of the Texas Council of Churches, remembered seeing the campaign as offering the potential of "seeing real democracy at work" and transforming a "glimmer of hope" into a greater federal commitment to the nation's poor, no matter what color. "And that's what was exciting about it," Nieto recalled. It was "almost ... utopian. ... Wow, this world could be better?" The notion that a multiethnic group of poor people could meet with members of Congress and federal agency officials, as the SCLC promised, fired his imagination and the most optimistic beliefs in American democracy. As the son of a pastor called to help the poor, Nieto had seen his share of poverty growing up in San Antonio and then ministering to mostly migrant workers in the lower Rio Grande Valley. When the SCLC called, Nieto answered and was suitably impressed with the campaign's organization and philosophy. Most importantly, Nieto "felt that they were listening," a first for African Americans in his own experiences in west Texas.⁴¹

⁴¹ Leo Nieto, interview by author; and Leo Nieto letter to Ralph Abernathy, April 23, 1968, Box 49, Folder 3, SCLC. Nieto represented a small but growing contingent of ethnic Mexican leaders in Protestant denominations – sometimes called *los Protestantas* – to advocate a unique blend of Chicano liberation and the Gospel, one which went far beyond the traditional missionary model of

For some, it was about one issue only. Rafael Duran, a longtime member of Tijerina's Alianza in northern New Mexico, viewed going to Washington as a dream come true. "Since I was a kid, my grandfather used to tell me how we were robbed of land by the U.S. government," the 67-year-old said at the time. "I was always looking for a way to come to Washington to get it back. It was taken by fraud." Fellow *aliancista* Cleofes Vigil echoed this, telling a reporter that his presence was less about welfare and more about regaining control of Mexican land from both the federal government and large corporations, who are "fencing us in like a concentration camp."⁴²

Others saw such issues as interrelated. Roque Garcia of Santa Fe had been a member of the Alianza for several years and even had set fire to fences in order to publicize the land rights issue. Losing the land was inextricably linked to poverty among ethnic Mexicans, he argued, but he also viewed the trip to Washington as an opportunity to protest urban renewal efforts in Santa Fe, in which low-income people were paid below market value for their homes and then shuttled into public housing. The latter were "concentration camps for la raza," he recalled. "The people didn't like that when I came out and said it."⁴³ He hoped to take this issue, in addition to welfare rights, vocational programs, and child care, to officials in Washington – as did many other New Mexicans, including Gregorio

evangelizing individuals. Paul Barton, "¿Ya Basta? Latino/a Protestant Activism in the Chicano/a and Farm Workers Movements" in *Latino Religion and Civic Activism in the United States*, ed. Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 128-130, 137-138. See also Leo D. Nieto, "The Chicano Movement and the Churches in the United States," *Perkins Journal* 29 (Fall 1975): 32-41. Here, he lays out a theological statement for the Chicano experience, one which identifies with the poor.

⁴² *Washington Post*, May 28, 1968.

⁴³ Roque Garcia, interview by author.

Ruiz, Piedad Padilla, and Guadalupe Luna, all of whom struggled to survive on meager welfare benefits. As a welfare rights activist in East Los Angeles, Alicia Escalante also saw the campaign as a way to serve multiple constituencies, all of whom were poor and somehow touched by the welfare system. She took to Washington “the issue of civil rights, of police brutality, of welfare abuse by administration, on and on and on,” she stated. “My hopes were that things could change within the welfare system so that women got training to go to work, child care which was non-existent” and overall enforcement of laws that were on paper but rarely put into practice.⁴⁴

Not all activists were as optimistic about making a claim to the government – or for that matter interested in the more orderly methods of lobbying establishment politicians. According to Ernesto Vigil, he and many members of the Crusade, including Corky Gonzales, were attracted more to King’s militant language regarding protest strategy in Washington:

[King said w]e will shut this system down. We will bring Washington to a standstill until it addresses the demands that we’re going to place before the power structure in D.C. And if you’re not responsive, we will shut the city down in massive civil disobedience and challenge the conscience of the country and the world to do something ... Yeah, we’ll do it nonviolently, but we’re going to do it. That’s what we all looked forward to participating in, and that particular vision and that particular rhetoric coincided with the views that the organization was evolving in anyway. It struck a chord with the core activists of the Crusade for Justice.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Quote by Alicia Escalante, interview by author, September 19, 2005, by telephone. Roque Garcia, interview by author; *Washington Post*, May 24, 1968; *People’s World*, May 18, 25 and June 1, 1968; and *The Worker*, June 2, 1968.

⁴⁵ Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

By early March, King had begun to downplay the most extreme forms of massive civil disobedience after initially suggesting that PPC participants might block traffic on the Potomac River bridges between Washington and the Virginia suburbs, or snarl hospital emergency rooms in the region. Such suggestions had received a cacophony of condemnations from public officials, journalists, and even some of King's long-time allies. Contrary to claims by some scholars, however, King had not abandoned completely the threat of more aggressive civil disobedience across Washington, viewing such actions as viable if not preferable.⁴⁶ Apparently at least some activists were counting on the PPC to reach that level of protest.

* * *

For Chicano activists, the death of Martin Luther King Jr. deeply saddened them but also reinforced their desire to reach out to their African American counterparts, both spiritually and physically. This often took the form of eulogies in Spanish and English likening King to Moses or even Jesus Christ, consoling African Americans while reminding ethnic Mexicans that he fought for them as well.⁴⁷ To Reies Tijerina, his death also meant

⁴⁶ Biographer Peter Ling argues that, by early February, King had backed away from this rhetoric and returned to what Ling called a "Selma model of nonviolence." *Martin Luther King Jr.*, 278-280. Although he toned down his rhetoric, little evidence suggests that King abandoned consideration of such tactics. *New York Times*, December 5, 1967, and March 4, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, December 5 and 7, 1967, and March 5 and April 1, 1968; *Washington Post*, February 7 and 8, and March 5, 1968; Yglesias, "It May Be a Long, Hot Spring in the Capital"; FBI Acting Director of Security memo to Deputy Director for Support, March 15, 1968 (names redacted); SCLC press release, April 1, 1968, Box 122, Folder 10, SCLC; and King, press conference transcript, December 4, 1967, MLKPP.

⁴⁷ For instance, "The Prince of Peace is Dead – Unidos Venceremos," *El Gallo*, April 1968, and "En Memoria de Martin Luther King" and "A Luther King Por Magali Chain Palavicini," May 1968; Alba Sanchez, "In Memoriam: Dr. Martin Luther King," *LADO*, May-June 1968; and Guadalupe Saavedra, untitled, *Chicano Student*, April 25, 1968. See also *The Worker*, April 23, 1968.

the need for greater efforts to connect with their black counterparts. In an interview shortly after King's funeral, which he and Corky Gonzales attended, Tijerina told black commentator Elsa Knight Thompson that, "We're going to strengthen our ties, our unity. We have no other choice."⁴⁸ He expanded on this in another, more animated appearance with interviewer Della Rossa, saying that, "There is no salvation for the Indo-Spanish or the black people without each other's assistance and support." But he also said he noticed a change in his black brethren at King's funeral. Characterizing the funeral's mood as "fantastic" because the "[t]he people were angry," Tijerina suggested that King's death "was the end of the peaceful approach and non-violence. It was the greatest mistake the militant right-wingers have made."⁴⁹ Although Stokely Carmichael and other adherents of Black Power might have agreed with such sentiment, it clearly put Tijerina at odds with the rhetoric Ralph Abernathy and the SCLC had hoped to maintain.⁵⁰

This potential for conflict worried a few other prominent Chicano activists – at least one to the point of backing out of the campaign. After King's assassination, FLOC leader Baldemar Velásquez said that he "lost hope. I didn't think anyone could pull it off. ... [T]o pull together a cross-racial, cultural united front around class, it was going to take an extraordinary ability to articulate that. I think Martin had that. I didn't think anyone else

⁴⁸ "Interview with Reies Tijerina," interview by Elsa Knight Thompson, n.d. [mid-April 1968?], in *Testimonio: A Documentary History of the Mexican American Struggle for Civil Rights*, ed. F. Arturo Rosales, (Houston: Arte Público, 2000), 320.

⁴⁹ Reies Tijerina, interview by Della Rossa, April 15, 1968, Box 52, Folder 5, RLT.

⁵⁰ Reies Tijerina, interview by Della Rossa, April 15, 1968, Box 52, Folder 5, RLT; and "Interview with Reies Tijerina," in *Testimonio*, ed. Rosales, 309-320.

had that.”⁵¹ Not even César Chávez, Velásquez suggested. Indeed, Chávez never committed to the campaign beyond verbal support and sending underlings to its organizing meetings. Despite several pleas from Abernathy and campaign participants to come to Washington, Chávez responded that physical ailments and the sheer organizing challenge of the grape boycott required his undivided attention to the work of the United Farm Workers. He later told an AFSC staff member that, “He had felt it would be immoral for him just to go and make a speech and then go back to California, that if he had come to the Poor People's Campaign he would have to stay and be part of it.”⁵² Speculation about what difference Chávez may have made would be counterfactual. But, clearly, it was unfortunate that the best known Chicano movement leader – and the one most committed to nonviolent strategy – stayed away from Washington that spring.⁵³

During the next month, shaken but determined SCLC officials mapped out a plan to take advantage of the newfound enthusiasm for the Poor People's Campaign and put the ambitious program into action. While campaign coordinators busily recruited marchers in each participating city, the PPC steering committee hammered out demands to take to Congress and federal agencies. A vanguard then would take these demands to Washington

⁵¹ Baldemar Velásquez, interview by author.

⁵² Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, “César Chávez,” August 23, 1968, in Community Relations Division (CRD) Folder 51910, “Economic Security and Rural Affairs 1968 – Comms and Orgs: United Farm Workers Organizing Committee,” AFSC.

⁵³ Chávez and Larry Itliong telegram to SCLC, April 29, 1968, and Abernathy, Young and Lafayette telegram to Chávez, June 4, 1968, both in Box 69, Folder 11; Leo Nieto telegram to Chávez, May 2, 1968, Box 70, Folder 1, all in Office of the President Files, Part I, Papers of the United Farm Workers, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit (hereafter known as UFW).

as a “last chance” for official action and if they were not met, as expected, eight caravans would begin to cross the country, the first on May 2 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, picking up supporters along the way and numbering in the thousands when they reached the capital. The first phase would culminate with a massive rally over Memorial Day weekend and then transition to a period of direct action, including demonstrations, lobby-ins, and civil disobedience that most likely would lead to arrests. Such civil disobedience, as King had suggested earlier, could then move to other cities across the nation, in the form of boycotts, as well as to the two major political party conventions.⁵⁴

But despite a delayed launch, plentiful resources, and substantial public goodwill after King’s death, the campaign still posed a sizable organizational challenge to the SCLC – especially in coordinating the campaign’s many moving parts in a media fishbowl. That the organization had a new leader in Ralph Abernathy, who the media constantly compared to his predecessor, often unfavorably, compounded the problem.⁵⁵ Even the black press, epitomized by the *Chicago Defender*, joined Abernathy’s doubters by asking a series of hard questions but providing few answers: “Has he the requisite intellectual tools to attain the

⁵⁴ “Poor People’s Campaign, 1968,” and “National Boycott for the South & North; Areas Included – Chicago and Miami,” Box 177, Folders 8 and 6, SCLC; and *Jet*, May 9, 1968.

⁵⁵ In contrast to the middle class, college-educated King, Abernathy had more humble roots in rural Alabama and often more readily identified with the black working class than his predecessor. Although accurate, such observations by journalists and politicians often served as a subtle critique of a man not considered as prestigious, polished, and therefore acceptable to white liberals. This is epitomized by Paul Good, “‘No Man Can Fill Dr. King’s Shoes’ – But Abernathy Tries,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 26, 1968. For similar perspectives, see *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1968; *Houston Post*, May 19, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 26, 1968; and *Time*, May 31, 1968. For a rare contrasting view, see Simeon Booker’s more sympathetic piece in *Jet*, not surprising for a magazine geared for a black working-class audience. “Rev. Abernathy ‘To Get Moving’ On ‘Job Left Behind By Martin,’” *Jet*, April 25, 1968.

prominence necessary for ... effective leadership on a national scale? ... It is an acid test.”⁵⁶

Yet none of these developments, even changing leadership so abruptly, challenged the stubborn persistence of SCLC paternalism.

Maria Varela could attest to that. Hired by Tijerina as a coordinator for the PPC’s southwestern contingent, Varela had dealt with her share of veiled sexism in the black freedom struggle and then the Alianza. Varela had first come to the South at the behest of Students for a Democratic Society activist Casey Hayden and soon landed in Selma, Alabama, in 1963. Then-SNCC staffers Bernard Lafayette and Frank Smith believed her Roman Catholic background would help facilitate SNCC support for a local black catholic pastor who had opened his parish to the movement. She also worked with Lafayette’s successor, Worth Long, to develop a voter literacy program, and then in 1965, she went to Mississippi to produce educational materials for local organizers including voting guides, farmers cooperative materials, children’s readers, and film strips. By late 1967, funding for such programming had dwindled and made a jump to the Chicano movement more attractive, especially to an organization interested in interethnic organizing. After meeting Varela at the Conference for New Politics, Tijerina prompted a letter exchange in which he invited her to join the Alianza; he was “so glad to know that you are a true fighter and a very brave girl ... ,” adding that, “it would be very nice if you could come to Albuquerque and spend some time among our people.”⁵⁷ Despite the patronizing tone, Varela went to work

⁵⁶ *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 14, 1968.

⁵⁷ Tijerina letter to Varela, September 14, 1967, Box 42, Folder 1, RLT. See also Varela letter to Tijerina, September 7, 1967, in same folder; and Maria Varela, interview by author, June 18, 2005, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

for the Alianza – only to find out that “[h]e wasn’t an organizer, he was a preacher” in the classic sense.⁵⁸

But at least Tijerina cared about land rights and how it affected his fellow Chicanos. In contrast, Varela loathed what she considered the SCLC’s paternalism toward both women and other movements of colors. Representing both, Varela saw great potential for the marginalization of Chicano activists by SCLC officials. Thus, it was not surprising when an SCLC coordinator (most likely Minority Group Coordinator Tom Houck) arrived in Albuquerque and began giving orders and taking over the logistics that Varela and others already had organized. She said that she snapped:

We got into a terrible argument. ’Cause he was coming in doing the typical SCLC – he was a white boy ... telling us what to do. I remember – I must have had ... a lot of rage in me. I remember grabbing his shirt and his neck and pushing him against the wall, and saying, ‘Look m.f. You’re, in our country now ... so back off.’ I just reamed him out, and he turned whiter.⁵⁹

Although perhaps over the top, her response seemed to work as he backed down.

Other issues nearly threatened Tijerina’s participation in the campaign, adding to the enmity SCLC officials and his fellow activists developed toward him. One dispute between Tijerina and Corky Gonzales arose after both claimed to be the head of the PPC’s southwestern contingent for recruitment and fundraising purposes. It is certainly possible that SCLC officials told both men that they were in charge, but to resolve it, the organization asked Black Panther Lauren Watson to mediate, considering his Denver ties to Gonzales and a skepticism of nonviolent strategy that he shared with Tijerina. Watson and another

⁵⁸ Maria Varela, interview by author.

⁵⁹ Maria Varela, interview by author.

Panther traveled to Tierra Amarilla, where Tijerina and company “were shocked to see us,” Watson recalled. “... There’s no telling what they thought when these two big black guys showed up. Because they had it laid out like a Western movie. Everybody had guns, were wearing bandoleros ... but they were gracious.”⁶⁰ The parties resolved the dispute after a day, reaffirming Tijerina’s position in the campaign as well as winning a key concession sought by top SCLC officials: leave the guns at home. Yet on the eve of the campaign, Tijerina threatened to pull out after the SCLC supplied less funding than originally promised, risking many Alianza members’ ability to make the trip. The confusion led to one returned bus before SCLC found additional money, but the tensions symbolized by the misunderstanding remained.⁶¹

Tijerina did not make the campaign’s opening salvo at the end of April, when the “Committee of 100” – one-third steering committee members and two-thirds recruited poor people – descended upon Washington with the campaign’s list of demands. A last-minute arrest on the Saturday night before the trip put Tijerina in jail on twenty-four counts stemming from the 1967 Tierra Amarilla raid, a move SCLC leaders protested and called a clear attempt at hampering the march.⁶² But a dozen ethnic Mexicans did make the trip, including Varela, Gonzales, Rafael and Carmen Duran of the Alianza, and Lares Tresjan of

⁶⁰ Lauren Watson, interview by author.

⁶¹ Quote by Lauren Watson, interview by author. Also, *Albuquerque Journal*, May 19, 1968, in Box 61, Folder 8, RLT; and Gutiérrez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant*, 221-222.

⁶² William Rutherford telegram to New Mexico Governor David Cargo, April 28, 1968, Box 179, Folder 5, SCLC. The protests appeared to work as officials released Tijerina on bond, although not in time for his participation in the Washington action. His legal troubles from the raid would continue to dog him throughout the campaign.

the United Farm Workers. In fact, at least thirty of the participants were ethnic Mexican, American Indian, or Puerto Rican, with the rest either black or white. For the first time, the public face of the PPC was more than just King, Abernathy, or a handful of other SCLC aides. Those taking active speaking roles ranged from Victor Charlo and Melvin Tom of the National Indian Youth Council to Miguel B arragan of the San Antonio Bishop’s Committee for Spanish-Speaking and white Appalachian activist Click Johnson.⁶³

While some observers deemed the three-day episode in Washington a promising beginning because of its *orderly* demonstration of democracy – constituents respectfully proposing changes to their government representatives – the organizers celebrated something else: a genuinely multiethnic integration and articulation of the groups’ concerns. The goals that seemed rather alien at times to black organizers just two months previously appeared throughout the Committee of 100’s demands – and without appearing out of place or tacked on. In addition to universal concerns over welfare rights, access to adequate education and health care, fair employment practices, and poor people’s full input in policy decision-making and implementation, the demands included explicit ethnic Mexican issues, such as requests for special housing programs for Spanish-speaking people “in line with their cultural habits,” withdrawal of “all subsidies, ... contracts and services from farm employers who employ illegals or ‘green card holders’ during a strike,” full investigations of “illegal

⁶³ That the public rarely saw this “public face,” other than in the *Washington Post*, will be addressed in an analysis of media coverage in Chapter Five. SCLC, “Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor Presented to Agencies of the U.S. Government by the Poor People’s Campaign and the Committee of 100,” April 29-30 and May 1, 1968, 15-18, 45-56, Box 177, Folder 24, SCLC; and *Washington Post*, April 29-30 and May 1-2, 1968.

jailings, brutal beatings and even killing of Mexican-Americans by the police.”⁶⁴ And a re-evaluation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo led off the list of foreign policy requests to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, including an end to relations with apartheid South Africa. Not all ethnic Mexican priorities made the list, including the use of Spanish in the classroom. But overall, ethnic Mexicans’ unique issues were well represented. Indeed, this initial foray into Washington appeared to represent a clear turning point. Declared Walter Fauntroy, a Washington, D.C., councilman and SCLC official, during a rally on the first evening, “We’re starting something tonight. Everyone here stands on the threshold of a great new effort in U.S. history.”⁶⁵

* * *

On May 2, 1968, Coretta Scott King laid a wreath where her husband had been killed, pledged her “eternal loyalty and dedication” to the work “he so nobly began,” and officially launched his last crusade. After a brief memorial service, Ralph Abernathy, wearing jeans and a denim shirt, started the “Freedom Train” to Washington with more than 1,000 marchers and two mules pulling a wooden cart. The caravan, set to traverse from Memphis through Marks, Mississippi, and the Delta and then wind its way through the rest of the Deep South, had begun its long march to Washington. It was joined by eight other caravans: the Southern, Eastern, Midwestern, Western, and San Francisco caravans, the Indian Trail, the Appalachian Trail, and the Mule Train. And it was on these journeys across

⁶⁴ SCLC, “Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor,” April 29-30 and May 1, 1968, 7, 9, 32, Box 177, Folder 24, SCLC.

⁶⁵ Quote in *Washington Post*, April 30, 1968. SCLC, “Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor,” April 29-30 and May 1, 1968, 1-45, Box 177, Folder 24, SCLC.

the nation that both the seeds of unity, as well as conflict, among the marchers would start to be sown.⁶⁶

Born out of the Minority Group Conference, although reminiscent of high-profile but shorter actions like the UFW's Delano Grape March, SCLC's Selma-to-Montgomery march, and James Meredith's March Against Fear, the PPC caravans offered both the dramatic media spectacle favored by SCLC and the opportunity to recruit and build community and momentum along the way. City after city, communities warmly received the caravans, orchestrating sympathy rallies and marches and contributing both supplies and people.⁶⁷ The caravans themselves, carefully coordinated at times and wildly disorganized at others, took on their own distinct personalities as they crept across the country.⁶⁸ For instance, the Southern Caravan had an old-fashioned civil rights aura, as several hundred marchers traveled through one-time freedom struggle flashpoints Selma, Birmingham, and Montgomery, the latter on the day of Governor Lurleen Wallace's funeral. Mostly African American with a handful of whites, this caravan proved the most homogenous. In contrast,

⁶⁶ *New York Times*, May 3 and 5, 1968.

⁶⁷ Indeed, sympathy rallies and marches continued throughout the campaign's Washington phase, including Solidarity Day. The most prominent ones occurred in Chicago's Uptown, Sacramento, and New York's Central Park, in which thousands of Puerto Ricans gathered. *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 1968; *People's World*, June 29, 1968; and *The Worker*, May 28, 1968.

⁶⁸ While designated caravan marshals called into headquarters with daily progress reports on their caravan's mileage, location, planned evening activities, and numbers of people and buses (or mules), many caravans faced setbacks caused by illnesses, delays, vehicle breakdowns, and logistical snags. According to marcher-analyst Doug Otto, many participants on the Eastern Caravan were so exhausted by the trip, they returned home immediately – and leading him to conclude that the caravans were ultimately more destructive than constructive. Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon; *New York Times*, May 10, 1968; and Otto, "The Use of Converging Caravans in the Poor People's Campaign: An Historical and Descriptive View," in "PPC – Caravans" folder, 29, 36, 39-40, AGP.

both the Eastern and Midwest caravans had more diverse, urban constituencies. Starting with fifty participants in Brunswick, Maine, the Eastern group added blacks, whites, and Puerto Ricans in every major city it passed down the Eastern seaboard. By the time it reached the outskirts of Washington, it totaled nearly 1,000 people in two dozen buses. The Midwest Caravan boasted 500 disproportionately young, participants, many of whom belonged to youth gangs in Chicago and Milwaukee and were recruited to be marshals in Resurrection City. Dubbed the most suspicious and potentially violent by the FBI, the Midwestern group traveled through several industrial cities, including Detroit, where ironically Father James Groppi, a white Catholic priest who led Milwaukee's open housing marches, became the campaign's first victim of violence: a beating at the hands of the police.⁶⁹

Perhaps the most photographed of the caravans, the Mule Train featured fifteen wagons pulled by mules and was designed to dramatize the abject poverty of rural Mississippi. Nearly scrapped because of its inherent impracticality, the Mule Train proved to be symbolic, but more often of the larger campaign's logistical challenges than of poverty itself. Wagonmaster Willie Bolden, an SCLC activist from Savannah, Georgia, spent inordinate amounts of time making sure the animals were taken care of properly. "You knew that the Humane Society ... would be on our tail to try to get us for abusing animals, so the first thing I did was to find me two people in Marks, Mississippi, who knew"

⁶⁹ Otto, "The Use of Converging Caravans in the Poor People's Campaign," in "PPC – Caravans" folder, 1-45, AGP; *Washington Post*, May 18, 1968; SCLC, "Poor People's Campaign 1968 – Caravan Chronicle," Box 177, Folder 8, SCLC; *Washington Post*, May 7-9, and 18, 1968; and G.C. Moore memos to W.C. Sullivan, FBI, May 15 and 18, 1968.

everything about mules, Bolden recalled. “... I didn’t know nothing about mules.”⁷⁰ SCLC avoided such accusations, but the train ran into other legal troubles when Georgia Governor Lester Maddox arrested Bolden’s crew rather than allow them passage on a state highway. The train became so delayed that it arrived in Washington in late June, two days after the climactic Solidarity Day rally.⁷¹

The Mule Train offered the starkest images of poverty in the rural South, and subsequently garnered the most attention in historical accounts of the campaign.⁷² Yet the Western Caravan boasted two distinctive qualities that made it unique: the sheer distance it traveled, and its rich diversity. It would be on the dozen or so buses of the Western Caravan where one of the key legacies of the campaign began to form. Beginning in Los Angeles, winding its way through Arizona and New Mexico to El Paso, up through Albuquerque and Denver and then east to Kansas City, St. Louis, Louisville, and finally Washington, the caravan covered more than 3,200 miles and twelve states – roughly 500 miles longer than the next longest caravan, the so-called Indian Trail from Seattle. After spending anywhere from five to eight days on the road together, in both exuberant rallies and intimate living quarters, large sports venues and personal homes, a community started to develop on those buses – sometimes between African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and American Indians and even more often among people of the same ethnicity from different cities. In many ways, the

⁷⁰ Willie Bolden, interview by author, November 5, 2005, Atlanta, Georgia.

⁷¹ Willie Bolden, interview by author.

⁷² See Freeman, *The Mule Train*; McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 94-97; Chase, “Class Resurrection”; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 355; and Hilliard Lackey, *Marks, Martin and the Mule Train* (Jackson, Miss.: Town Square Books, 1998).

Western caravan experience foreshadowed the unusual dynamics at work during the campaign, both productive and destructive.⁷³

Fresh from the high school blowouts and their aftermath in East Los Angeles, Carlos Montes and several of his fellow Brown Berets made a last-minute decision to join the campaign. Elizar Risco, editor of *La Raza* newspaper, called Montes and asked him if he wanted to go. Although “we idolized Malcolm X, we still respected King,” Montes recalled. “It didn’t take much else to convince us to say, ‘Hell, yeah, let’s go.’”⁷⁴ Montes, Ralph Ramirez, Berets president David Sanchez, Gloria Arellanes, and three others literally ran to make one of three buses leaving Will Rogers Park in Watts. Montes and his friends, part of approximately forty-seven ethnic Mexicans from the Los Angeles area, joined a predominantly African American bus, and joked that the Mexicans were riding in the back of the bus. He remembered the trip as a “good experience,” one in which he bonded with fellow Chicanos, like welfare rights activist Alicia Escalante and her daughter Lorraine, as well as with African Americans. At least for Montes, it was a return to earlier moments in

⁷³ Reflective of the larger interpretation of the campaign, the Western Caravan received less attention from both journalists and scholars – perhaps because it began in mid-May, after the Southern and Eastern caravans had arrived in Washington. Yet it also seems that those caravans which fit into the more stereotypical mold of black and white in the South, or traveled through the major media markets of New York, Chicago, and of course Washington, received the most interest. The only detailed accounts of the Western Caravan came from two known communists – Patricia Bell Blawis, an activist with the Alianza in New Mexico, and Sam Kushner, editor of the San Francisco-based communist weekly *People’s World*. Blawis’ account is most extensive, but suffers analytically because of a close allegiance to Tijerina. *Tijerina and the Land Grants*, 116-125; and *People’s World*, May 25, 1968, and June 1 and 8, 1968. Their affiliations interested the FBI, who traced the caravan as well. FBI memo, Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 20, 1968; and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover memo to President Johnson, May 16, 1968. See also Harrison Fletcher, “Seeing Red,” *Westword* (a Denver weekly), February 19, 1998.

⁷⁴ Carlos Montes, interview by author.

his life when he interacted with African Americans on a daily basis, growing up near Watts, then going to school with blacks in Boyle Heights, and eventually working in a predominantly black janitor crew. There, he learned about the conditions in Watts that led to the 1965 rebellion. “That influenced me later on” in his relationships with blacks, an experience his friends from East Los Angeles did not always have because they grew up in a more insular community. “Some of the Chicanos were prejudiced against blacks,” admitted Montes, adding that he believed riding in the caravan was eye-opening for them.⁷⁵

Only 123 people arrived in Phoenix as part of the Western Caravan, due to funding shortages that denied the participation of at least eighty people in Los Angeles.⁷⁶ Although not necessarily a devastating problem – more people wanted to go than could be accommodated comfortably – such realities left some people disappointed and even angry. In Albuquerque, when SCLC officials initially said the organization did not have enough money to pay for marchers to return, Reies Tijerina threatened to pull all Alianza members from the campaign. Unlike in Los Angeles, march officials scrambled to find the money then, but the threat gave campaign officials, as well as other ethnic Mexican activists, reason to doubt Tijerina’s commitment to the larger campaign. In addition, upon arrival in

⁷⁵ Carlos Montes and Alicia Escalante, interviews by author; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 16, 1968; and *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1968.

⁷⁶ According to James Hargett, PPC coordinator in Los Angeles, the cost for transportation, food, and accommodations was about \$125 per person. *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1968.

Phoenix, marchers like Brown Berets president David Sanchez left after a PPC rally because of commitments back home.⁷⁷

Throughout the caravans and then the campaign in Washington, many participants left what the media interpreted as “early” to return home, presumably because of their disgust for the campaign. Some did for those reasons, or as for 80-year-old Lee Buck of Lambert, Mississippi, the experience proved too fatiguing. But other participants planned only to come for a day, weekend, or week, if they could make it at all. Many members of the Los Angeles contingent planned to be in Resurrection City for eight days. José Angel Gutiérrez, of the Mexican American Youth Organization in Texas, explained that it was often not about whether someone supported the campaign; it was about whether they were willing to risk whatever livelihood they had to attend. “It wasn’t a question of interest,” said Gutiérrez, who attended the Minority Group Conference but not the campaign itself. “I was very interested. It was a question of money, a question of obligations. I was in a leadership role myself. I had a family beginning to grow, all kinds of obligations. It wasn’t easy.”⁷⁸ Undoubtedly, this phenomenon – particularly for Chicano activists and ethnic Mexicans who lived a few thousand miles away from Washington – contributed to the turnover among participants.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 9 and 16, 1968; and Carlos Montes and Gloria Arellanes, interviews by author.

⁷⁸ José Angel Gutiérrez, interview by author.

⁷⁹ Carlos Montes, Gloria Arellanes, and José Angel Gutiérrez, interviews by author; and *Washington Post*, May 17, 1968.

Yet more folks joined the caravan than disembarked in each city, allowing the convoy to grow by at least one bus after each leg. After a rousing rally in Phoenix, where Montes met SNCC leader H. Rap Brown, the Western Caravan continued on to El Paso. But in Montes' hometown, the reception proved much different. Bomb threats, believed by marchers to be whipped up by local news coverage, prompted the cancellation of a community rally. Instead, marchers felt "imprisoned" in the El Paso Coliseum, which local police and Texas Rangers encircled supposedly for their protection. To campaigners, this rang false. Gloria Arellanes remembered the Texas Rangers, casually drinking beer as they were hustled into the arena, and being warned not to look into the men's eyes because "that was a challenge and ... the invitation to get your head beat up."⁸⁰ Journalists observed authorities that "turned away friends of the poor, even those who came to bring food."⁸¹ Rather than sleep in houses and smaller more intimate venues, as they did in other cities, marchers spent a sleepless night on cots on the arena floor and ate bologna sandwiches. Despite apparent efforts to squelch community interest in the campaign, the caravan added a fourth bus in El Paso, one which headed toward Austin, San Antonio, and other Texas cities, while the others went north in what promised to be livelier showings in Albuquerque and then Denver, the respective homes of the Alianza and the Crusade.⁸²

⁸⁰ Gloria Arellanes, interview by author.

⁸¹ *People's World*, June 1, 1968.

⁸² FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover memo to President Lyndon Johnson, May 15, 1968; SAC El Paso to FBI Director, May 17, 1968; FBI memo, El Paso, May 15, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1968; *People's World*, June 1, 1968; "SCLC PPC: Caravan Chronicle," n.d., Box 177, Folder 8, SCLC; and Carlos Montes and Ralph Ramirez, interviews by author.

Funding problems continued to plague the Western Caravan as it moved through Albuquerque and Denver, because SCLC funds and local fundraising efforts could not cover all of those who wanted to participate. But organizers in both cities tried to mitigate such tensions by being gracious hosts. In Albuquerque, a surprisingly diverse crowd of 1,200 people, representing a variety of ethnicities, races, generations, and religions, participated in the march and rally. “This is like a beautiful garden with all those wonderful colors of black, brown, red, and white,” Tijerina declared. “It makes a beautiful bouquet.”⁸³ Joining Tijerina at the head of the procession were Father Luis Jaramillo, the Rev. Lee Hobart, Alaskan Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan, and eventually Ralph Abernathy – a march that wound its way for nearly five miles through the city’s poorer ghettos and barrios to the finale in the city’s Old Town district. Even Roman Catholic Archbishop James Peter Davis, who had earlier questioned Tijerina’s prominent role, marched as well. “It is my hope that those who feel as I do will be able to do as I am doing,” said Davis. “... to look beyond Mr. Tijerina and what he stands for, to approve the march and hope that it will be successful despite his connection with it.”⁸⁴ In the square, several hundred more people met the marchers and attended a rally with an almost festival-like atmosphere, food, entertainment including Hollywood actor and activist Marlon Brando, and speeches by Abernathy, Tijerina, Tuscarora chief Mad Bear Anderson, and others. Other American Indian leaders, Thomas

⁸³ *People’s World*, May 25, 1968.

⁸⁴ *Albuquerque Tribune*, May 11, 1968, in Box 61, Folder 7, RLT.

Banyaca of the Hopis, Clifford Hill of the Creeks, and Beamon Logan of the Senecas were present and spoke at a reception the previous evening.⁸⁵

Marchers had a similar experience in Denver, where they rallied on the state capitol steps and, for the first time, met their counterparts from the equally diverse San Francisco caravan.⁸⁶ Ernesto Vigil recalled never seeing anything quite like it. It was “a swirl of activity and excitement,” he remembered. “Black Panthers strutting around. And these farm people out of northern New Mexico, wearing their cowboy hats and their worn-out jeans. And (then) the hippies.”⁸⁷ After enjoying the hospitality of local churches, the Crusade for Justice, and the local chapter of the American Friends Service Committee on the previous night, marchers attended a rousing rally of nearly 5,000 in front of the Colorado Statehouse – where one marcher recalled a similar number of unemployed coal miners had gathered during the Great Depression. Speech after speech by poor people, as well as Tijerina, Gonzales, and Bernard Lafayette, captivated the crowd, growing to several thousand strong as morning became afternoon. Shouts of “¡Viva!” came from not only ethnic Mexicans, but also an Indian chief from the Mandan tribe in North Dakota. The diversity on the platform

⁸⁵ *Albuquerque Journal*, May 16 and 18-19, 1968, in Box 61, Folders 7-8, and Katherine Hattenbach and Shirley Hill Witt form letter to New Mexico hosts, May 29, 1968, Box 31, Folder 21, both in RLT; *Denver Post*, May 15, 1968; *People's World*, May 25, 1968; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; SAC Albuquerque to FBI Director, May 18, 1968; and Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants*, 116-117.

⁸⁶ According to the SCLC, the caravan coming from the Bay Area had forty ethnic Mexicans, sixty blacks, ten whites, ten Asian Americans, and thirty-six American Indians. “SCLC PPC: Caravan Chronicle,” 10, n.d., Box 177, Folder 8, SCLC.

⁸⁷ Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

impressed observers, including a reporter who called it “a tableau the likes of which Sunday benchwarmers in Civic Center had never seen and most likely never will again.”⁸⁸

But even if the diversity and interethnic cooperation had a superficial quality to some, such as rally attendees demanding “to hear some real folk music” from American Indians, it represented a real start at developing substantive ties among the ethnic Mexicans present. For Ralph Ramirez, a Brown Beret in his late teens at the time, it was eye-opening. “Just coming into contact with all of these people ... the Tijerina people” was a real education, he recalled.⁸⁹ Chicano activists like Montes, Ramirez, Escalante, and Varela were also able to gather, from that initial visit to Denver, their first up-close impressions of Corky Gonzales and the Crusade. Gonzales played the role of emcee, deftly managing the sometimes unwieldy rally, while female Crusade activists served the “best meal of the whole trip” at the Annunciation Catholic School. Despite such gendered divisions of labor, the Crusade made a positive first impression on their Chicano counterparts – even those such as Arellanes and Varela who were critical of sexism’s role in the Chicano movement. Significantly, the Brown Berets accepted Gonzales’ invitation to ride in the Crusade’s buses for the rest of trip to Washington.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Quote in *Rocky Mountain News*, May 20, 1968. Also *Denver Post*, May 20, 1968; and Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants*, 117-118.

⁸⁹ Ralph Ramirez, interview by author.

⁹⁰ *Denver Post*, May 19, 1968; *Rocky Mountain News*, May 19, 1968; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and Alicia Escalante, Carlos Montes, Ralph Ramirez, Maria Varela, and Gloria Arellanes, interviews by author.

After the rally, at least fifteen buses and a series of cars and trucks carrying roughly 800 marchers left Denver and headed to Kansas City and then St. Louis. “Riding hour after hour ... we sing, hold philosophical discussions, make elaborate signs for ... Washington, play checkers, and learn Spanish,” one marcher said at the time.⁹¹ Singing, in particular, played a vital role in making the time pass and bringing people together. This was the specialty of longtime Denver activist Juanita Malouff-Dominguez, who with her husband, Emilio, and their children attended the campaign for a month. “We’re on the bus. I start writing songs, and we start singing them,” she recalled.⁹² For the next several hours, they sang new words to old songs from the Mexican Revolution in the same style that African Americans changed spirituals to fit the context of the movement in Alabama or Mississippi. Then they stopped so caravan-goers could receive hot food, a place to rest, and a chance to interact outside the confines of a cramped bus.⁹³

As the buses slowly closed in on Washington, tensions over *who* the campaign should be about surfaced in more noticeable ways. At a sparsely attended rally in Kansas City, it became clear early on that the program planned by local black leaders stressed the plight of poor African Americans with little regard for the caravan’s non-black members. In response, Corky Gonzales took over the program briefly to give Tijerina, a few American Indian marchers, and others an opportunity to share their stories, then finishing off the

⁹¹ *People’s World*, June 1, 1968.

⁹² Juanita Malouff-Dominguez, interview by author, December 2, 2007, Taos, N.M.

⁹³ Craig Hart and Gloria Arellanes, interviews by author.

segment with “you can have your program back now.”⁹⁴ Similarly, in St. Louis, a debate ensued over who should take the lead. In a symbolic gesture, caravan coordinators decided that those marchers able to do so would walk across the Mississippi River bridge, clapping and singing in unison. But marchers disagreed over who should go first, with Tijerina and ethnic Mexicans insisting that American Indians do so, as the most dispossessed group. Lauren Watson and other Black Panthers challenged the notion, but the Mexican argument won out and the nearly 900-person contingent walked across the bridge, sat down briefly at its apex, and continued to the buses waiting on the other side. Witnesses pointed out that a moment of “togetherness right at this point” and “an atmosphere of brotherhood and good feeling” had emerged in the end, making the initial dispute instructive.⁹⁵ It especially demonstrated ethnic Mexicans’ evolving commitment to their indigenous brethren and to each other. Ethnic Mexicans carried such a strategy all the way to Washington, where it was used to distinguish their agenda amid the cacophony of the campaign. Indeed, it proved to be a distinct and clever strategy to wield influence within the campaign, yet its potential divisiveness also held risks.⁹⁶

In Louisville, the caravan’s last overnight stop, marchers encountered a series of crises that carried over into their time in Washington. When the caravan arrived, SCLC officials directed them toward their accommodations at Churchill Downs, site of the

⁹⁴ *Denver Post*, May 20, 1968.

⁹⁵ Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants*, 120.

⁹⁶ FBI memo, May 20, 1968, Denver, Colo.; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 20-21, 1968; *Denver Post*, May 20, 1968; author’s interview with Ralph Ramirez; Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 57; Tijerina, *They Called Me ‘King Tiger,’* 103, 106-107; and Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants*, 120-122.

Kentucky Derby. The children enjoyed playing in and around the famous racetrack. But as a place to sleep, Ralph Ramirez found it “kind of insulting” to be placed in an outside venue. “There was a lot of grumbling,” he recalled.⁹⁷ This was compounded when SCLC and Black Panther coordinators discovered that ethnic Mexicans planned to stay somewhere other than Resurrection City upon arriving in Washington. Reading reports about how the city could not accommodate arriving marchers because of slow construction, members of the Crusade and the Alianza secured other housing in the nation’s capital. SCLC aides feared the decision would be interpreted by outsiders as voluntary segregation, while several Panthers viewed the decision as both a slight and ethnic Mexicans’ unwillingness to live among the shantytown’s largely black poor. According to Tom Houck, the SCLC’s coordinator of non-black minority groups,

... the black group didn't like this. They wanted to be together, and they said that as long as this was our last chance ... they were going to stay together, rather than part and become enemies. ... It split everybody up, which was probably, I think, the greatest factor that we had disunity.⁹⁸

Ralph Ramirez recalled it a bit differently. “A lot of the rank and file understood,” he said. “[T]heir attitude was if we could stay in a place like that we would do it too.”⁹⁹ Ironically, residents of Resurrection City later leveled the same charge at Ralph Abernathy and other SCLC higher-ups who stayed in the Pitts Motor Hotel for most of the campaign. Some Black Panthers also stayed elsewhere. Lauren Watson, for instance, slept mostly on a church

⁹⁷ Ralph Ramirez, interview by author.

⁹⁸ Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon.

⁹⁹ Ralph Ramirez, interview by author.

cot because several of his friends became ill living in Resurrection City: “I spent too much time going back and forth from the hospital” to worry about whom was sleeping where.¹⁰⁰

Even before arriving in Washington, those on the Western Caravan – as well as their counterparts on the Indian Trail and San Francisco Caravan – had made substantial sacrifices just getting to Washington. Yet their eight days on the road paled in comparison to the sacrifice of the so-called “advance party” from Los Angeles, led by James Mims, minister of the Household of God Bible-Way Church in Watts. Mims and his band of twenty-six survived thirteen days on the road and no less than four major breakdowns in their old school bus, arriving three days after the Western caravan despite leaving a few days earlier. “[T]here’s no way we won’t make it,” said Mims before arriving in Washington. “We’re going to make it even if we have to carry the bus on our backs. The spirit of Martin Luther King is in all of us.”¹⁰¹ The group arrived tired but ebullient, especially white bus driver Leonard Whittington, who said he experienced a religious conversion during the trip – prompted by his steering the bus down a steep incline after a power failure darkened the vehicle’s lights. Therefore, by the time the Western caravan and other groups had arrived in Washington, a week after Resurrection City itself had begun to rise, some participants already had credited the campaign as a life-changing experience.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Quote by Lauren Watson, interview by author. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 23, 1968; FBI memo, Louisville, Kentucky, May 23, 1968; Ralph Ramirez and Carlos Montes, interviews by author; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and Mark Comfort, Black Panther from San Francisco, interview by Robert Wright, November 16, 1968, Oakland, California, MSRC.

¹⁰¹ *Denver Post*, May 16, 1968.

¹⁰² *Los Angeles Times*, May 9 and 26, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 26, 1968; and “SCLC PPC: Caravan Chronicle,” n.d., Box 177, Folder 8, SCLC.

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To a crowd's joyful shouts of "freedom," Ralph Abernathy on May 13 drove the first stake into the ground at Resurrection City and began the tent city's role as symbol of the entire campaign.¹⁰³ SCLC aides viewed Resurrection City as having primarily a pragmatic function in housing, feeding, and organizing up to 3,000 poor people and their allies. Of course, this very visible settlement in West Potomac Park, adjacent to the Lincoln Memorial and the Reflecting Pool, naturally attracted some attention, including curious tourists. But first and foremost, the city was a temporary home for some of the nation's poorest. Sketches by University of Maryland architect and local activist John Wiebenson envisioned an orderly city of approximately 500 A-frame "homes" of plywood, two-by-fours, and canvas, running along two streets and supplemented by several larger structures to house the city's governing council, health and dental clinic, cafeteria, freedom school, cultural exchange center, and other services expected in a town of comparable size. Engineers planned to tap into old sewer and water lines, once used by temporary Navy Department buildings during World War II, for modern toilet and bath facilities, as well as food preparation. As architectural sketches often do, the sketches of Resurrection City took on an almost surreal look – stripped of the chaos and messiness so often found on a city street, particularly what would be found in the real Resurrection City.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Originally named City of New Hope, the new settlement became Resurrection City after officials at a California hospital complained that SCLC had borrowed their institution's name without asking.

¹⁰⁴ David Brinkley, *Washington Goes to War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 119; *New York Times*, May 10, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 13-14, 1968; John Wiebenson, "Planning and Using Resurrection City," *Journal of the American Institute Planners* 35 (November 1969): 405-411; and Resurrection City sketch, n.d., Box 177, Folder 19, SCLC.

The city ran into problems immediately. Shortages in funds slowed the construction of Resurrection City “tents,” forcing the diversion and delay of some of the incoming caravans to suburban churches and other temporary locales. Four days after Abernathy sank the first stake, housing for 700 residents had been completed, despite at least 800 more marchers temporarily staying elsewhere and another 1,500 expected within a few days.¹⁰⁵ Bernard Lafayette, national coordinator for the PPC, compounded the issue by holding a somewhat panicky press conference in which he exaggerated the situation. Predicting that eventually one million people would descend upon the capital by month’s end, Lafayette announced that SCLC needed \$3 million in order to finish construction of Resurrection City, adding that housing construction might be halted until the organization raised at least some of the money. The media responded to these numbers with incredulity, with good reason, as the SCLC’s Andrew Young clarified the next day: SCLC needed \$3 million for the entire campaign, including donations, and marchers would not exceed 50,000. “I talked to Bernard and he just goofed,” Young explained, but the press conference left a lasting impression that Lafayette and SCLC might be over their heads.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ According to Tony Henry, the deputy national coordinator of PPC, Abernathy’s insistence on driving the first stake into the pristine ground complicated efforts to prepare the city properly for utilities. Rather than dig the necessary trenches to lay electrical and phone lines, as well as hook up pipes to the sewer system, before marchers arrived, such work remained weeks after people were living there. Not only would this have raised campers’ comfort level, but it may have blunted criticism of SCLC leaders for using a motel as their headquarters. “But he wanted to be the first man to drive in the stake and wanted nothing done to the land before he did that and wanted the people to move in immediately afterward, so we had to try to do it that way,” Henry said. Tony Henry, interview by Kay Shannon, July 15, 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

¹⁰⁶ Quote in *Washington Post*, May 19, 1968. Also, *Washington Post*, May 18, 1968; and Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 42-48.

By May 20, whatever crisis existed had been averted, as the tent city quickly developed into a thriving community. Residents named the grassy “streets” in between tents, such as Love Lane and Abernathy Avenue, as well as their homes – the Sugar Shack, The Great Society, Cleveland Rat Patrol, or simply *Venceremos*, to name just a few. Doctors made “shanty calls,” barbers kept busy, and marshals tried to keep the peace. Soon the Many Races Soul Center opened, designed for inter-cultural sharing, as well as the Poor People’s University (PPU), complete with class schedules and courses on everything from the intellectual (structural reasons for poverty) to the practical (non-violence training). As one official explained it, the PPU was designed to expand folks’ horizons beyond “another pair of shoes,” and, indeed, at least one observer witnessed a class on Gandhi transform itself from a dull lecture “into an outdoor marketplace of ideas.”¹⁰⁷ A newspaper written solely by the camp’s inhabitants, *True Unity News*, began to publish, and seemingly every night, top-flight entertainers like Muddy Waters, Diana Ross, and Gladys Knight and the Pips, passed through town. Resurrection City even had a ZIP code, 20013 – in part to allow for residents’ receipt of government benefits. In short, Resurrection City appeared to be a benefit to the larger cause.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Quote by Ernie Austin, interview by Kay Shannon. Also Linda Avena, “PPC - Participants Observer,” June 6, 1968, AGP. A partial list of classes offered through the PPU includes: Power and How It Can Be Used Effectively; Urban Planning; Planning Education; Effects of Poverty on Growth and Development; The Negro in Literature; and Biblical Bases for Social Action and Human Dignity. “Newsletters for PPU,” May 30-31, 1968, Box 159-10, Folder 30, Civil Rights Documentation Project Vertical File, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University (hereafter known as MSRCVF).

¹⁰⁸ *Washington Post*, May 14 and 18-20, 1968; *New York Times*, May 18-19 and 24, 1968; *Time*, May 24, 1968; *The Worker*, May 26, 1968; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 20, 1968; Stoney Cooks, Tom Offenburger,

Soon after the Western Caravan arrived from Louisville, so did the heavy spring rains that transformed Resurrection City from a disheveled but lively site of multicultural exchange and class unity to an uncomfortable bog. “The weather didn’t give us a break at all,” recalled Lauren Watson. “It rained like in the Bible.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, it rained heavily more than half of the days Resurrection City existed, climaxing with more than two inches of precipitation in a twenty-four hour period on June 12-13. As a result, people’s attitudes soured as the mud and water dramatically reduced mobility around the camp, making not only organizing protests more difficult but also the simplest of services such as providing meals. Rain and heavy winds in late May knocked down the main dining hall, and campaign officials temporarily evacuated the city of approximately 2,400 by half. Medical experts worried that the encampment’s subpar conditions, due to contaminated water and inadequate shelter, posed a health risk to its inhabitants. A major health outbreak never occurred, leading Dr. Edward Madzique of the PPC’s medical services committee to observe that “it may have been the terrible conditions in which the poor residents lived normally that prevented” one.¹¹⁰

and Ernie Austin, interviews by Kay Shannon, MSRC; *True Unity News*, June 1968, Box 180, Folder 14, SCLC; and Linda Avena, “PPC - Participants Observe,” June 7, 1968, Folder 1, AGP.

¹⁰⁹ Lauren Watson, interview by author.

¹¹⁰ Quote in Florence Ridlon, *A Black Physician’s Struggle for Civil Rights: Edward C. Madzique, M.D.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2005), 275. Also, Health Services Coordinating Committee memos, May 28, 1968 and n.d., “Health Services,” Folder 21, Box 159-10, MSRCVF; *Washington Post*, May 29-31; Matt Nimetz memo to Joe Califano, May 29, 1968, Box 36, Aides – Gaither, LBJ; and Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 66. Perhaps in an attempt to find something positive amid the rain, PPC official Tony Henry boasted to a reporter that Resurrection City did not have roaches – presumably a positive compared to many residents’ previous homes. *The Worker*, June 16, 1968.

SCLC could not be blamed for the weather itself, but many saw the organization's response as inadequate. Scholars have stressed SCLC's sheer disorganization, and undoubtedly this played a role.¹¹¹ Yet a distinction should be made. The surviving records of SCLC and PPC officials such as Al Gollin, chairman of the campaign's General Services Administration Committee, demonstrate a remarkable amount of time and energy planning out the campaign and Resurrection City. The problem was no SCLC staff member had built, or even run, a city of a few thousand. The physical task simply overwhelmed an organization still reeling from the death of King. Andrew Young recalled being "in a daze, functioning on autopilot."¹¹² And Maria Varela remembered vividly how "awful" campaign officials looked. "I don't know how they got up in the morning," she said. "... Bags under their eyes – they all looked just terrible."¹¹³ In fact, one of the only surviving health forms from the medical services committee is that of Ralph Abernathy, who apparently suffered from physical exhaustion throughout the campaign. Needless to say, the protest strategy for which SCLC was known, including mass arrests and actions that prompted sympathetic media coverage, had to compete with the day-to-day governance of a city struggling to survive.¹¹⁴

Only a few ethnic Mexicans and other Spanish-speaking marchers moved into Resurrection City. When the Western Caravan arrived in Washington on the evening of May

¹¹¹ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*; and Chase, "Uncertain Resurrection."

¹¹² Young, *An Easy Burden*, 485.

¹¹³ Maria Varela, interview by author.

¹¹⁴ Ridlon, *A Black Physician's Struggle for Civil Rights*, 275.

23, they went straight to the Hawthorne School, a private, liberal secondary school, to set up their own camp. “We didn’t see what we had hoped to see” when they reached Washington, said Ernesto Vigil of the Crusade for Justice, adding that it was “clearly for understandable reasons. Martin Luther King had been assassinated.” But “we figured, well okay, if they don’t have their shit together, we wish them the best of luck. Meanwhile, we have to get on with what we want to do during the time that we’re here.”¹¹⁵ What they had to do was take Chicano demands to federal officials, demands that often differed from those of African Americans, such as land rights and access to bilingual education. In the process, as Gonzales and Tijerina hoped, the Chicano movement would receive greater recognition nationally. And if they could build a strong network among themselves and with American Indian activists, that was an added bonus. Little time passed before Tijerina and Gonzales began to lead protests independent of SCLC leadership, much to the latter’s dismay.

* * *

Perhaps the most critical decision made by Chicanos in Washington was the choice to stay at Hawthorne, because it would be in this space where much of the constructive relationship-building took place, sometimes with folks of other ethnicities, but definitely among ethnic Mexicans. The Hawthorne School stood three stories tall and, like any standard secondary school, had basic food preparation, toilet, and shower facilities. Although certainly crowded for hundreds of fatigued marchers fresh from a cross-country trip and then daily demonstrations in a steamy Washington spring, the conditions at

¹¹⁵ Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

Hawthorne proved far better than in Resurrection City: it was warm and dry. Sent as a scout at least a week early, the Crusade for Justice's Richard Romero worked with local ministers and eventually located Hawthorne as a suitable alternative for ethnic Mexicans. For the private liberal school's founders, Eleanor and Alexander Orr, allowing poor people to live there reflected the school's hands-on learning philosophy. Nothing could be more "real" than the campaign's participants, who periodically visited classes and talked to the students that spring. And for ethnic Mexicans, including Tijerina and Gonzales, it ensured they stayed together. "How do you take poor people into inhumanity?" asked Nita Jo Gonzales, the Gonzales' eldest daughter, in explaining her father's rationale. "... You cannot ask people to come and not provide a place that was not more humane than what they left."¹¹⁶ To be fair, most ethnic Mexicans had not seen Resurrection City before it became overcrowded and muddy. But the comparison between it and Hawthorne, if anything, propelled the new residents of the school even more to create a community amid the cots, cold sandwiches, and institutional walls – one which heightened the humanity of the poor rather than compromised it.¹¹⁷

In contrast to depictions by the press, which framed Hawthorne as a one-dimensional facility of ethnic segregation, the school was multiethnic from the beginning and

¹¹⁶ Nita Jo Gonzales, interview by author.

¹¹⁷ *El Gallo*, May 1968; Vigil, interview by author; and *Washington Daily News*, July 10, 1968. For more on Hawthorne, see Mary Finch Hoyt, "A Free-Wheeling School with High Marks," *Parade* magazine, January 18, 1970.

remained so throughout the campaign.¹¹⁸ While predominantly ethnic Mexican, Hawthorne also housed a sizable number of Appalachian whites, African Americans, and American Indians, although the latter found their own place to stay soon after arriving. “By it being initially a multiethnic contingent, word then spread about here’s this place that’s not going to be inundated by rain,” said Vigil. “Provisions have been made for food ... so people sort of gravitated towards it because it was better organized. ... We were not going to run people off because they were the wrong color.”¹¹⁹ Nor was there racial segregation inside the facility. Instead, campaign participants separated themselves based on family status, with single men staying in one area and families in another, usually the basement. Although the average campaigner was in his or her twenties, both ethnic Mexicans and American Indians were more likely to bring their entire families and thus had a greater age range. For every young Brown Beret in their late teens there was an older ethnic Mexican with family in tow. Viewing the PPC as fundamentally a family affair, Corky’s wife, Gerry, insisted that she and the children come along; all but three of their eight children made it. Their eldest, Nita Jo, who had stayed behind, ended up quitting her job and flying to Washington after seeing police threaten her parents on national television. Hawthorne in general had a higher

¹¹⁸ Journalists made little effort to explore Hawthorne and its deeper significance; not only was Resurrection City more centrally located and easier to access, but the shantytown offered a more straightforward setting for a troubled campaign. In contrast, Hawthorne and its multiethnic makeup and Chicano leadership challenged too many assumptions for the mainstream press to handle. See Chapter Five. Nor did the FBI or government officials seem to pay Hawthorne much heed. Daily reports to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Attorney General Ramsey Clark gave blow-by-blow accounts of the activities inside Resurrection City, but never the Hawthorne School.

¹¹⁹ Ernesto Vigil, interview by author. Of course, SCLC provided the food, hauling provisions from the organization’s warehouse to the school, and then letting Crusade and Alianza activists handle preparation from there. No matter how independent the folks in Hawthorne believed they were, SCLC still controlled the purse strings. Ernie Austin, interview by Kay Shannon.

percentage of women than Resurrection City, although men outnumbered women in both places. With the exception of head cook Emilio Dominguez of the Crusade, women in Hawthorne took the lead in organizing meals and sleeping arrangements – something mostly left to men in Resurrection City. This may have explained the tight-knit community of which Hawthorne residents spoke.¹²⁰

Of course, some tension existed, particularly in the first few days at Hawthorne, when all the newly arrived campaigners could do was to wait for the rain to subside. According to observer Linda Avena, “people were unable to leave the building, unable to clean their muddy clothes ... and perhaps most importantly, were unable to do any kind of demonstrating.”¹²¹ SCLC officials made it an even worse by momentarily forgetting them. The result was considerable testiness and somewhat of a let-down for folks ready to confront the government. The feeling of isolation also proved acute, as the school was just far enough away to feel out of the loop.

As the initial rains stopped, considerable interethnic cooperation began to blossom within the confines of the Hawthorne School. Sometimes this took the form of a cultural exchange, such as the impromptu jam session Ernesto Vigil witnessed in a Hawthorne common area. A white man from Appalachia “starts playing this kick-ass boogie-woogie on

¹²⁰ Ernie Austin, interview by Kay Shannon; and Gerry Gonzales, Nita Jo Gonzales, Ralph Ramirez, Ernesto Vigil, Gloria Arellanes, Alicia Escalante, and Juanita Malouff-Dominguez, interviews by author. In discussing Resurrection City in his demographic study of the PPC, Albert Gollin suggests that, “Any such concentration of young people, strangers to each other, free of parental or neighborhood constraints, and with sketchily-defined roles in the situation, is quite likely to make the task of creating community organization a difficult one.” It seems logical that the opposite may have occurred in Hawthorne, something confirmed by its residents. Gollin, *The Demography of Protest*, 9-10.

¹²¹ Linda Avena, “Participants Observe,” June 21, 1968, Folder 2, AGP.

the piano, and all of a sudden, these poor white Appalachians were kicking their heels, black folks jump in, and Mexicans sit around tapping their toes,” he recalled. “You had an interesting cross-pollination. You can’t structure that.”¹²² Rudy Gonzales, one of Corky’s sons, found it invaluable in his later years to have played with kids of many backgrounds and ethnicities during their stay at Hawthorne during the campaign. “We had a blast,” he recalled, but it also took some adjustment to interact with very poor whites. “I had never seen poor whites before. I mean dirt poor. Some hardly had shoes.”¹²³ And despite his young age, Rudy was not alone. Nearly all of the Chicano activists I interviewed echoed this sentiment. To them, whites were typically rich elites who suppressed the rights of other minorities and ran the nation’s power structure; they certainly were not *more* impoverished than ethnic Mexicans. But when the contingent from Appalachia arrived, half of them were white, which came as a bit of a shock. “I thought I was poor until I got there and saw some of these people,” said Roque Garcia from Santa Fe, who had grown up without indoor plumbing or a regular diet of meat.¹²⁴ Gonzales recalled that one initial response by the ethnic Mexicans there was to gather the extra shoes and jackets they brought for the trip and to give them to their white counterparts.¹²⁵

¹²² Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

¹²³ Rudy Gonzales, interview by author.

¹²⁴ *The (Santa Fe) New Mexican*, June 4, 1968, in Box 61, Folder 9, RLT; and Roque Garcia, interview by author.

¹²⁵ Carlos Montes, Rudy and Gerry Gonzales, Ernesto Vigil, and Nita Jo Gonzales, interviews by author.

Another more long-term result was developing a more sophisticated way of viewing poverty. Of course, Corky and Gerry Gonzales had been exposed to poverty of all kinds and knew – at least vaguely – about the rich organizing tradition poor whites had in the Appalachian area. But for younger activists it gave them something to think about. “It was the first time that a lot of us had any contact with Puerto Ricans, with Appalachian whites,” recalled Ralph Ramirez of Los Angeles. “... When you never have been out of the state ... never like even over one hundred miles from where you were born to come in contact with all these people and these different cultures and these different subcultures,” it was an education far beyond any classroom.¹²⁶ For Carlos Montes, it helped crystallize some concepts in his head: “I went through a political change, from what I would call a nationalist to more of an international perspective, where I saw the struggle here at home. ... My rhetoric changed.”¹²⁷ Rather than vilifying white men, he began to criticize the capitalist structure and its most common defenders, *rich* white men – a change that proved invaluable to him in years to come, first as an activist in the Chicano movement into the 1970s and then as a labor organizer in Los Angeles.¹²⁸

Years later, Corky Gonzales credited the campaign as one source of deepened ties with American Indian, white, and black activists, albeit the latter being with Stokely Carmichael and SNCC, not the SCLC. He developed relationships with American Indian activists, adding substance to his rhetoric of indigenous identity, and after meeting James

¹²⁶ Ralph Ramirez, interview by author.

¹²⁷ Carlos Montes, interview by author.

¹²⁸ Carlos Montes, Rudy and Gerry Gonzales, and Nita Jo Gonzales, interviews by author.

Groppi, Gonzales invited the radical Milwaukee priest to visit Denver, which he did at least twice. But perhaps more importantly – at least for Gonzales’ short-term vision – activists’ time at Hawthorne and the campaign in general proved a unique period in which they expanded their networks and strengthened their bonds among themselves. “When would we have gotten together with the Crusade?” asked Brown Beret Carlos Montes, referring to Corky Gonzales’ group. “Lived with them? Shared bread with them? Marched every day with them?”¹²⁹ For Montes and other young activists, the campaign proved a unique opportunity – on someone else’s dime – to spend a month or more with Chicano counterparts they otherwise might not have met. Ernesto Vigil rattled off all the people he met for the first time during the campaign, folks that he would come to know very well in the next several years at the Chicano Youth Liberation Conferences and the 1970 Chicano Moratorium: Brown Berets, United Farm Workers activists, the Reverend Leo Nieto of the Texas Council of Churches, Ernesto Cortes of the Industrial Areas Foundation, Tijerina and members of the Alianza, Maria Varela, and Betita Martinez. Based on their contact there, welfare rights activist Alicia Escalante went to Denver to work with the Crusade for Justice, while Nita Gonzales met a Puerto Rican campaigner she would eventually marry – expanding the Gonzales’ ties into a larger Latino alliance.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Carlos Montes, interview by author.

¹³⁰ Rudy Gonzales, Gerry Gonzales, Ernesto Vigil, Alicia Escalante, Nita Gonzales, Carlos Montes, and Ralph Ramirez, interviews by author; and 1969 and 1970 appointment calendars, Box 14, Folder 11, James E. Groppi Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wis.

Living and eating together was part of this bonding experience, but so was being arrested and even beaten together. Chicanos did not participate in every demonstration organized by SCLC, nor did they wait for SCLC permission to have their own marches – much to that organization’s chagrin. Yet, it was the protests most opposed by SCLC that turned out to be the campaign’s most memorable: the demonstration outside the Supreme Court building over Indian fishing rights, and an anti-war action outside the White House. Both sparked sharp reactions by police, violence that, if anything, drew activists closer together.

A week after the Western Caravan arrived in Washington, ethnic Mexican activists chafing at the campaign’s inactivity agreed to support American Indian participants’ march on the U.S. Supreme Court to protest a recent ruling on treaty-protected fishing rights in the Columbia River valley of Washington state.¹³¹ Ralph Abernathy and SCLC officials initially opposed the decision, hoping to avoid mass arrests before the campaign’s climactic rally – not to mention the questionable public relations of storming the Supreme Court, considered the most untouchable of the federal branches of government. A certain amount of resentment, however, also seemed to be in play. In his autobiography, Abernathy said the Supreme Court rally represented the Indians’ “own private agenda,” one independent of the larger campaign’s objectives and, frankly, disrespectful of his leadership.¹³² After American Indian leaders Hank Adams and Mad Bear Anderson successfully recruited the support of

¹³¹ For fuller context on fishing rights, American Indian activists, and their participation in the campaign, see Chapter Four.

¹³² Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 520.

Tijerina, Gonzales, and George Wiley of the National Welfare Rights Organization, Abernathy reluctantly went along – although many followers of SCLC instead joined a Jesse Jackson-led rally outside the Department of Agriculture. The protest outside the court itself proved a spectacle but little else. Supported by nearly 400 people, twenty-five or so Indians smoked peace pipes, played tom-toms, and waited for the clerk of the court to acknowledge them. The clerk finally agreed to meet with about twenty protesters, a meeting that lasted nearly three hours, leading Tijerina to characterize the protest as “a monumental victory.”¹³³

While the meeting accomplished little in the way of policy, what happened during the march back to the Hawthorne School became a rallying cry among those present – Mexican, black, and Indian. Police had made three arrests after a few demonstrators lowered the U.S. flag outside the court building. But the perpetrators who broke five basement windows – the focus of most media accounts – appeared to go unpunished. Abernathy later claimed that government saboteurs must have broken them, but Ernesto Vigil admitted years later that it was he and a few of his fellow activists. Perhaps the tactical police squad present knew just that because, as hundreds of protesters began to make the trek to Hawthorne, the officers literally attacked. Sparked by what the media called a couple of lewd gestures by Chicano teens, police officers on motorcycles nearly ran over several children and set off a small melee. While the horrified crowd watched, officers beat and arrested about a dozen

¹³³ Quote in Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 112. Also, FBI memo, “Reies Lopez Tijerina: Internal Security – Spanish American,” June 6, 1968; SAC-WFO to Director, May 30, 1968, Box 3, Folder 6, and Hank Adams note to Reies Tijerina, May 28, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, all in RLT; Brigadier General Thomas J. Camp “ticker tape” memo to White House, May 30, 1968, Box 57, HU4 confidential, WHCF, LBJ; and Robert Taylor (of secret service) memo to Jim Jones and Joe Califano, May 29, 1968, “Riot Control – Poor People’s March,” Aides – Gaither, Box 36, LBJ; Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 107-112; *Washington Post*, May 30, 1968; and *New York Times*, May 30, 1968.

Chicano men, including Vigil and Danny Tijerina, son of the Alianza leader. “It was the first time I had ever saw anybody brutally beaten,” said Gloria Arellanes. “... Looking into the faces of these police officers, you could see so many different emotions. I remember one young man, just so embarrassed. You could see his pain.”¹³⁴

The aftermath proved particularly memorable in how it strengthened Chicano camaraderie. “You really find common cause when you sit in the same god-damned jail cell,” stated Ernesto Vigil, on the hours he spent behind bars with young Chicanos from New Mexico and California.¹³⁵ After authorities released them later that evening, a multiethnic crowd at the Vermont Street Baptist Church greeted them as heroes. We “received a thunderous reception, black folks standing up ... after we were bonded out and marching in,” Vigil recalled. “... It was really a tremendous time which we could have capitalized on.” Unfortunately, the moment for multiethnic unity proved fleeting after several Black Panthers from Denver challenged Ralph Abernathy and his aides, arguing that they had paid too much attention to their “junior partners.” After considerable awkwardness, Ralph Abernathy smoothed over their differences, at least publicly, but the damage had been done. Yet, ironically, this “power play,” as Vigil called it, ended up strengthening bonds among Chicanos, who concluded they could not count on some of their black brethren – even those from their hometown – when the chips were down.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Quote by Gloria Arellanes, interview by author. Also *Washington Post*, May 30-31, 1968; *El Grito del Norte*, October 31, 1968; and Ernesto Vigil, Rudy Gonzales, and Maria Varela, interviews by author.

¹³⁵ Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

¹³⁶ Ernesto Vigil and Craig Hart, interviews by author.

During the next several weeks, through the Solidarity Day march on June 19, the residents of Hawthorne led demonstration after demonstration. They went to the Department of Justice to protest indictments of those Brown Berets accused of inciting the East L.A. blowouts to the Department of State to demonstrate against government violations of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. They visited the Department of Agriculture to demand a commitment to fair labor standards by the nation's food producers and for cheaper food stamps, and to the White House to condemn the war in Vietnam. They also called on the Department of Education to punish school systems that perpetuated negative stereotypes of ethnic Mexicans in their curriculums. On Solidarity Day, Corky Gonzales brought most of these demands together in *El Plan del Barrio*, which became a model for later Chicano documents. Declaring that "poverty and city living under the colonial system of the Anglo has castrated our people's culture, consciousness of our heritage, and language," Gonzales offered a coherent list of demands in the areas of housing, education, job development and economic opportunities, law enforcement, farm labor, and land reform.¹³⁷

Chicano-led protests also produced poignant story after poignant story. Carlos Montes told how black workers at an agency cafeteria showed their solidarity by offering approving nods and letting protesters walk out with trays of food, while the Commandos, a black gang from Milwaukee, pleasantly surprised Pedro Archuleta and Modesta Martinez of the Alianza with blankets, coffee, and sandwiches during an overnight vigil at the State

¹³⁷ Quote by Gonzales, "El Plan del Barrio," in *Message to Aztlan*, ed. Antonio Equibel, 32. Also *Washington Post*, May 29, June 4-5 and 13-14, 1968; and Gonzales, "Sons of Chiefs and Kings and Bloody Revolutionists" press release, Box 179, Folder 10, SCLC.

Department. Maria Varela, who photographed much of the campaign, described the interactions she witnessed between younger Chicanos as “critical in forming some of the New Mexico folks who” came from remote rural areas and “were more isolated than the others.”¹³⁸ And most participants remembered the tearful silence as they watched the funeral procession of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, assassinated on June 5 after he won the presidential primary in California.¹³⁹

Many of the marchers received multiple educations during their time in Washington. One of them was Luís Diaz de León of Laredo, Texas. A member of the campaign’s small multiethnic delegation from Texas, de León repeatedly referred to Hawthorne in his interview as the “Freedom School.” Not only did he have the opportunity to travel and live with several African American activists from Houston, he and other ethnic Mexicans had their own moment of interethnic unity. When Tijerina wanted to banish their new friends to Resurrection City, Leo “Nieto and myself and the others said, ‘Hey, we’re all coming together from Texas and we stay together. We’re ... one delegation.’” After securing Ralph Abernathy’s help, “[t]hey stayed with us all through the ... (campaign).”¹⁴⁰ De León also received his “Vietnam anti-war education” while living at Hawthorne. After backing out of participating in a draft-card burning outside of the White House and weathering a little verbal abuse from his younger peers, de León bonded with Sal Candelaria, a Black Beret

¹³⁸ Maria Varela, interview by author.

¹³⁹ Carlos Montes and Maria Varela, interviews by author; *Washington Post*, May 29, June 4-5, 7, 10, 13, and 14, 1968; and Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants*, 135.

¹⁴⁰ Luís Diaz de León, interview by José Angel Gutiérrez, 1999, *Tejano Voices*: University of Texas at Arlington Center for Mexican American Studies Oral History Project, CMAS No. 135.

from San Jose, who had taken part in the protest and been on the painful end of a police beating:

Later that night *llegaron* and I was in ... in the kitchen, the cafeteria eating supper. *Y este Sal* had a white dirty T-shirt here in his hand. And he came over to where I was and he took it out and he said, 'Do you still think I'm chicken shit?' And, and there was blood coming out of this big cut. And that was the best education that I ever had for starting to read on the Viet Nam War and getting some kind of orientation that, hey, I'm anti-war.¹⁴¹

Hawthorne has been all but erased from the campaign's history. And at times, it was certainly cramped and chaotic, even more so after police flattened Resurrection City, sending residents to the school for shelter. Yet Hawthorne became a home away from home for ethnic Mexicans, as well as some of their Appalachian and Western counterparts. For the most part, people felt well-fed and care for there, which then energized them to take their fight to the federal government day in and day out. Most importantly, Hawthorne was a place where ideas and activities were allowed to percolate upward. The Highlander School's Mike Clark, who lived there and in Resurrection City, called Hawthorne one of "the most important parts of the campaign" because there "most of these educational activities were removed from SCLC and were started by poor people living together."¹⁴²

* * *

The Poor People's Campaign impacted the Chicano movement in yet another way, by contributing to Reies López Tijerina's ultimate marginalization among activists – a

¹⁴¹ Luís Diaz de León, interview by Gutiérrez.

¹⁴² Quote in Mike Clark letter to Chuck Fager, December 13, 1968, Box 105, Folder 12, Highlander Research and Education Center Records, Part II, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wis. (hereafter known as HREC).

process that also spoke to the larger urban-rural divide within the struggle. While scholars of the Chicano movement and Tijerina's biographers usually discuss the PPC in the context of his activism, his actions during the campaign do not seem to impact their overall analysis of the man.¹⁴³ He is considered either a misunderstood hero or a religious kook independent of his moment in Washington. But in fact, the campaign in Washington *was* Tijerina's high-water mark in both influence and publicity. Although he ran for governor upon returning to New Mexico in July 1968, he quickly disappeared from the scene and into a series of courtrooms and eventually prison. Tijerina had lost much of his support in the movement long before his eventual conviction in the Tierra Amarilla raid, and that process began in Washington. Tijerina's fall of sorts also relates to ongoing tensions between the urban and rural strains of the movement, but not necessarily in the way one would expect. Rather, while his decline could have hurt land rights as an issue, other Chicano activists including Corky Gonzales and César Chávez recognized the value of land reform despite the flaws of its most ardent spokesman. Again, the campaign experience shone a spotlight on how this process worked.

Ever since Martin Luther King Jr. made it clear that SCLC wanted ethnic Mexicans to participate fully in the campaign during the Minority Group Conference, Tijerina was a larger-than-life presence. From his passionate pleas for cooperation behind closed doors in Atlanta to his demands that American Indians walk first across the Mississippi River bridge in St. Louis, Tijerina had a knack for captivating an audience with his rhetoric and energy.

¹⁴³ See Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*; Busto, *King Tiger*; Nabokov, *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid*; Gardner, *¡Grito!*; Acuña, *Occupied America*, 369; and Gómez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics*, 115-118.

His attention-getting style proved effective in attracting the media, who saw his sometimes incendiary words as good copy, if nothing else – not unlike the rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael or H. Rap Brown. This was a deliberate strategy of Tijerina’s, and one he used to great effect. “For him, any media attention was one more brick in the wall or stepping stones to build power,” observed Maria Varela, who worked for the Alianza for nearly two years. “That’s what he thought his job was. He wasn’t an organizer. He was a preacher. And preachers need an audience. Otherwise, they are not functional.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the invitation from SCLC – an organization that knew a thing or two about media manipulation – to participate in the PPC could be attributed to Tijerina’s deft use of hyperbole and spectacle to gain attention for his cause. Without the citizen’s arrest of a park ranger, the destruction of fences, the raid on the Tierra Amarilla courthouse, and all of the speechifying that accompanied them, Tijerina may very well have remained an anonymous Pentecostal preacher from New Mexico.¹⁴⁵

Instead, Tijerina arrived in Washington and immediately added to the drama already playing out in the Poor People’s Campaign. For the most part, the media ignored the campaign’s ethnic Mexican participants in order to focus on the chaos of Resurrection City, as detailed in Chapter Five. But members of the press made an exception when Reies Tijerina spoke, usually about ethnic conflict. Not long after the Western Caravan reached Washington, Tijerina called a press conference to charge Ralph Abernathy and other PPC officials with exclusion and duplicity toward non-black marchers. “[B]lack militants have

¹⁴⁴ Maria Varela, interview by author.

¹⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid*, 15-18; and *Washington Post*, June 4, 1968.

taken over and nobody else gets a chance to talk,” complained Tijerina, adding that, “We may stay in Washington and do our own demonstrations separately.”¹⁴⁶ Abernathy placated Tijerina with promises of greater inclusions, but just days later, the land rights leader summoned reporters and television cameras again. After a shouting match with Hosea Williams of SCLC, Tijerina renewed his charges against the leadership – ones that he then repeated periodically for the duration of the campaign. Right before he left Washington, Tijerina launched one final salvo toward SCLC, telling reporters that, “The poor have been completely mocked. Never have I seen the poor so betrayed.”¹⁴⁷ Each time, Tijerina claimed to be speaking for “the poor,” “his people” and the small contingent of American Indians. And sometimes he genuinely did represent at least Westerners’ interests, particularly in terms of land reform and treaty rights.

At other times, however, ethnic Mexican marchers questioned both Tijerina’s effectiveness and whether his actions had become more of a distraction than anything else. His declarations about stolen land and cultural pride may have animated young Chicanos from afar, but given the opportunity to work closely with the land rights activist, many were left unimpressed. “Tijerina was hard to reach,” according to Miguel Bárragan, an activist Catholic priest from Texas. “He was pretty much into his pontificating.”¹⁴⁸ Corky Gonzales refused to criticize Tijerina publicly, saying that, “Any fights within our family, we keep

¹⁴⁶ *New York Times*, May 26, 1968.

¹⁴⁷ *Denver Post*, July 12, 1968.

¹⁴⁸ Miguel Bárragan, interview by author.

within the family.”¹⁴⁹ But behind the scenes, he came to believe that Tijerina’s harangues and public spats were counterproductive, according to Varela, his children, and FBI informants. Tijerina “did some incredible things in New Mexico, and some great things that needed to be done,” acknowledged Rudy Gonzales. “But he had no sense of organization. He didn’t know how to organize or prepare.”¹⁵⁰

Not unlike the disappointment many had with Ralph Abernathy’s decision to live in a motel, others close to Tijerina also saw a real gap between his public and private personas. Maria Varela, the daughter of a Mexican immigrant, questioned her association with Tijerina after he referred to a judge as a *mojado*, or “wetback,” and then when he showed no concern for the young Chicanos who followed him to Washington from New Mexico and were subsequently jailed for a land rights protest. SCLC lawyers, at the urging of Corky Gonzales, posted their bail, but Varela said, “I thought to myself what am I doing here?” Calling the incident “the final straw,” she quit the Alianza in the middle of the campaign and joined forces with Corky Gonzales.¹⁵¹ Residents of the Hawthorne School reported that Tijerina routinely ate better food and had better accommodations than the other marchers. Even the many children who had traveled with their families offered their own devastating critique, calling him Reies “TV-rina” because of his penchant literally to chase television cameras.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ *Denver Post*, June 10, 1968.

¹⁵⁰ Quote by Rudy Gonzales, interview by author. Also Gerry Gonzales, interview by author; Kay Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles; and SAC Atlanta to Director, May 24, 1968, Box 3, Folder 6, RLT.

¹⁵¹ Maria Varela, interview by author.

¹⁵² Rudy and Gerry Gonzales, Craig Hart, and Gloria Arellanes, interviews by author.

Yet, many of those who criticized Tijerina found the case for land grants compelling – so much so that Maria Varela, based on her experience with the Alianza and later conversations with Corky Gonzales and César Chávez, believed that the two leaders recognized the primacy of the land grants movement and had been prepared to lead their organizations’ support for Tijerina and the land grants cause. Chávez, with his close ties to Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, offered supportive words to Tijerina while keeping a distance from his perceived tactics. In the wake of the Tierra Amarilla raid, Chávez wrote cordial, carefully worded telegrams backing the land rights cause, and in late 1967, the union leader spoke at an Alianza meeting.¹⁵³ He told reporters later that, if he had lived in New Mexico, he would certainly be a member of the Alianza. Gonzales, who had cut his ties to the Democratic establishment, endorsed Tijerina’s actions more wholeheartedly. To support “this just and honorable cause,” Gonzales raised money for the Alianza and even worked out of the organization’s New Mexico office for several weeks in 1967 while Tijerina dealt with his legal troubles.¹⁵⁴ Another sign of support came from the Chicano Press Association newspapers, especially the Crusade’s *El Gallo*, which covered the land grant movement with enormous sympathy and viewed it as central to the larger Chicano struggle.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Tijerina also received several supportive telegrams in early 1968 from militant black leaders he had courted, including Ron Karenga, H. Rap Brown, and the leadership of SNCC. Karenga to Tijerina, January 3, 1968, Box 34, Folder 24, and SNCC to Alianza, January 5 and 9, 1968, Box 34, Folder 26, all in RLT. Such support would continue sporadically throughout his legal troubles into the 1970s.

¹⁵⁴ *El Gallo*, August 31, 1967.

¹⁵⁵ Maria Varela and Rudy Gonzales, interviews by author; Chávez and Gonzales telegrams to Tijerina, June 1967, Box 34, Folders 1-3, RLT; *El Gallo*, June 23, July 28, and August 31, 1967; *Rocky*

Thus, even as activists backed away from the leadership of Tijerina, many of these more urban Chicano activists recognized the importance of incorporating land reform and rights into their agenda more fully and because of his efforts. This inclusion proved tricky at times, given the different nature of the struggle in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado – one that privileged cultural and economic independence through the restoration of land rather than an expansion of government benefits or civil rights. But activists such as Corky Gonzales increasingly embraced both the practical and symbolic importance of land rights because it not only combated the common scourge of poverty, but it also reinforced cultural pride in the mythical homeland of Aztlán. Some of this work occurred during the Poor People’s Campaign. Gonzales included land reform in El Plan del Barrio, while members of the Crusade, the Brown Berets, and other more urban Chicano groups marched on the Department of State in support of Tijerina’s petition regarding the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In turn, Alianza members from New Mexico helped advocate for issues that were considered more urban, such as fighting police brutality. It was these sorts of gestures that led Ernesto Vigil to conclude that the urban and rural impulses of the Chicano movement, albeit real and contentious at times, took another step toward understanding each other during their time in Washington.¹⁵⁶

While Resurrection City received most of the attention, some of the most interesting interactions and exchanges of the PPC occurred a mile away at the Hawthorne School.

Mountain News, June 8, 11-12, 1967; Nabokov, *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid*, 150-151, 183, 192, 229, 241; Esquibel, *Message to Aztlán*, 254; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 31-33, 50-52.

¹⁵⁶ Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

There, a multiethnic community led by people of predominantly Mexican descent emerged. Far from perfect, Hawthorne still became a living experiment – a “Freedom School,” to quote one resident – in building a larger movement. After Resurrection City was knocked down, people continued to live in Hawthorne for several more weeks and made the school an incubator for many of the experiments in multiethnic organizing that the Poor People’s Campaign spawned. As Maria Varela summed it up, “There were connections made there. ... There were also connections that got broken.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Quote by Maria Varela, interview by author.

Chapter Four

Indians, Whites and Puerto Ricans: The 'Forgotten' Marchers

*"I think the biggest problem (is) that this is a black movement.
And this is the biggest problem that we've faced throughout the whole campaign."*

- Tillie Walker, American Indian leader¹

Of all the images produced by the Poor People's Campaign in the spring and summer of 1968, none perhaps was more arresting than that of hundreds of protesters milling around the U.S. Supreme Court building, banging on its doors, breaking windows, and singing Indian chants and "La Cucaracha." Although not immune from lively demonstrations, the high court generally received more praise and respect in public opinion than its executive and legislative counterparts, and, with that, often a little more decorum when people did disagree with court decisions. But on this day in late May, the crowd proved boisterous in its protests against the court's recent affirmation of curbs on American Indian fishing rights in the Northwest. Demanding a meeting with a representative of the court, the protesters eventually chose a delegation including Ralph Abernathy, Corky Gonzales, Reies Tijerina, fishing rights advocate Hank Adams, and sixteen other Indian activists to speak with Chief Clerk John Davis. They presented Davis with a petition laying out their grievances regarding how state fishing laws and quotas denied certain tribes the

¹ Tillie Walker, director of United Scholarship Service, interview by Kay Shannon, July 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

ability to sustain their communities through traditional tribal means and violated century-old treaties with the U.S. government. Of most immediate interest was the release of twenty-four demonstrators from a recent “fish-in.” The meeting ended hours later with no resolution.²

While activists interpreted the meeting as a triumph because someone was willing to listen, the petition’s substance and the participation of Indian leadership received little attention. Instead, media and subsequent scholarly interpretations of the demonstration outside of the Supreme Court building focused on the unruly crowd. Condemning the court protest as “foolish,” “illegal,” and “violent,” editorial pages concluded that if PPC participants did not recognize the protest as a bad idea, its leaders should have.³ “Poor people have poor ways,” intoned the *Washington Post*, but Abernathy, the editors argued, should have known better.⁴ Front page news stories emphasized conflict, such as the arrest of three people for lowering the U.S. flag in the plaza of the court to half-staff. Although no arrests were made in the much-publicized breaking of five basement windows, several Chicano teenagers were charged with disorderly conduct after police officers on motorcycles broke the marchers’ ranks. Moreover, press reports liberally quoted Abernathy and Tijerina far more than their Indian counterparts. One exception was Hank Adams, an Assiniboine-Sioux and a member of the National Indian Youth Council. But instead of identifying the

² *Washington Post*, May 30, 1968; *New York Times*, May 30, 1968; and *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1968. On public support of the court, see Gregory A. Caldeira and James L. Gibson, “The Etiology of Public Support for the Supreme Court,” *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (1992): 635-664.

³ *Washington Post*, May 31, 1968; *Time*, June 7, 1968; and *New York Times*, May 30, 1968.

⁴ *Washington Post*, May 31, 1968.

college-educated and bespectacled Adams as a native spokesman for fishing and treaty rights, the *Washington Post* called him “a white leader for Indian rights.”⁵ Perhaps his English-sounding name and the absence of a headdress confused the reporter. Indeed, the few images of people identified as Indians from the protest were of older men and women such as George Crow Flies High wearing headdresses and other traditional garb.⁶ Scholars subsequently have echoed much of their media counterparts’ treatment of the protest – that is if historians address it at all.⁷

This scenario suggests in many ways the dilemma in which non-black activists found themselves during the Poor People’s Campaign and often in politics at large. The protest and its aftermath highlighted the difficulty in finding space in a public discourse dominated by black and white, in which black meant poor and white meant privileged. This most often led to a general ignorance of or misunderstanding of a group’s distinct issues, and the presumption that the African American vision and its corresponding policy positions applied to all. While ethnic Mexicans experienced this marginalization by the media and SCLC leadership, their overall numbers and control of the Hawthorne School allowed them some influence in the campaign. For the smaller contingents of Americans Indians, poor

⁵ *Washington Post*, May 30, 1968.

⁶ *New York Times*, May 30, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, May 30-31, and June 2, 1968; *Time*, June 7, 1968; *U.S. News & World Report*, June 10, 1968; and *People’s World*, June 15, 1968. For a broader discussion of the media’s narrow framing of the campaign, see Chapter Five.

⁷ See Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 55; McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 131; and Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, 189-200. The protest goes unmentioned in Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*. The work of Robert Chase and Daniel Cobb are exceptions to this larger trend. Chase, “Class Insurrection”; and Cobb, “Talking the Language of the Larger World,” in *Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900*, ed. Daniel M. Cobb and Loretta Fowler (Sante Fe, N.M.: School for Advanced Research, 2007), 161-177.

Appalachian whites, and Puerto Ricans, however, the challenge of having their voices heard proved much harder. Not only were their issues treated as secondary, but both African American and, to a lesser extent, ethnic Mexican spokesmen compounded the problem by attempting to speak *for* these smaller groups.

Such experiences led most historians of the modern American Indian, Appalachian, and Puerto Rican struggles to disregard the Poor People's Campaign as solely a black endeavor, one with little significance for non-black activists.⁸ Indeed, interactions between

⁸ On Indian activism, see Charles Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005), 129-130, and *Messages from Frank's Landing: A Story of Salmon, Treaties and the Indian Way* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 59; Troy Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination and the Rise of Indian Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Alvin M. Josephy, Joane Nagel and Troy Johnson, eds., *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971; 1999); and Donna Hightower Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s," *Hypatia* 18 (2003): 114-132. On activism among poor whites from Appalachia, see Chad Montrie, *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); David E. Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power and Planning in Appalachia* (Appalachian Consortium Press, 1980; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994); Thomas J. Kiffmeyer, "From Self-Help to Sedition: The Appalachian Volunteers in Eastern Kentucky, 1964-1970," *Journal of Southern History* 64 (1998): 65-94; John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); and John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). On Puerto Rican community formation and activism, broadly defined, see Gina M. Pérez, *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement and Puerto Rican Families* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Carmen Teresa Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Whalen and Victor Vásquez-Hernández, eds., *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Judson Jeffries, "From Gang-bangers to Urban Revolutionaries: The Young Lords of Chicago," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 96 (2003): 288-304; Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; 1994); Andrés Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the New York Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Torres and José Velásquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago*; and Johanna L. Fernandez, "Radicals in the Late 1960s: A History of the Young Lords Party in New York City, 1969-1974" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2004).

African Americans and activists in these other movements only have begun to receive their scholarly due.⁹ Just a handful of studies – all in American Indian history – have treated the campaign as noteworthy, albeit in contrasting ways. In a now-classic discussion of Indian-black interaction, activist-scholar Vine Deloria Jr. suggested that the campaign compelled traditional tribal councils to take seriously the challenges and issues posed by younger Indians. “One good tangible result of Indian participation in the Poor People’s Campaign is that Indian people all over have begun to question the nature of their situation,” argued Deloria. “They are asking what their specific rights and benefits are and what the Poor People’s March could possibly do to improve their situation.”¹⁰ In contrast, Daniel Cobb depicts Indian participation in the campaign as the *end* of an era of reformist activism devoted to compelling the government to treat “the indigenous peoples within its borders

⁹ Sherry L. Smith explores the role of other movements in the fishing rights protests of the mid-1960s. “Indians, Counter Culture and the New Left,” in *Beyond Red Power*, eds. Cobb and Fowler, 142-160. In more general terms, scholars such as Paul Chaat Smith, Robert Allen Warrior, Charles Wilkinson, and Troy Johnson discuss Indian appreciation of black civil rights strategies. See footnote 8. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, a historian of the Black Power movement, proves far more specific in his analysis, particularly regarding the Black Panthers’ impact on other radical ethnic organizations, including the American Indian Movement and, most extensively, the Puerto Rican Young Lords. See Ogbar, *Black Power*, Chapter 6, and “*Puerto Rico En Mi Corazon: The Young Lords, Black Power, and Puerto Rican Nationalism in the U.S.*,” *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 18 (2006): 148-169. Johanna Fernandez also touches on Black Power’s impact on the Young Lords. See “Radicals in the Late 1960s”; and “Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City,” in *Freedom North*, eds. Theoharis and Woodard, 255-285.

¹⁰ Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1969), 187.

with justice and honor.”¹¹ Rather than prompt new questions, the campaign’s disappointments ushered in new strategies to answer age-old questions.¹²

A careful study of the campaign suggests that the experience of PPC participants indeed proved instructive to those Indians, poor whites, and Puerto Ricans who chose to attend – and even those who did not. This chapter argues that while the PPC offered great potential for interethnic collaboration, it more times than not highlighted the different social constructions of poverty among these smaller contingents in contrast to the priorities of African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and each other. Common ground was sometimes found, outside the Supreme Court building, inside the Hawthorne School, or within the thousands of small discussions and interactions held that spring and summer. But the campaign also produced lessons about how *not* to organize – particularly SCLC’s top-down model – and in the process strengthened the intra-ethnic resolve necessary to seek new solutions in the face of a recalcitrant government apparatus and narrow media framing, without totally giving up on earlier efforts such as court action. Thus, the campaign offered not a break or a new beginning for American Indians, poor whites, or Puerto Ricans, but an important bridge to the more hard-nosed activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s epitomized by the American Indian Movement and the Young Lords Organization.

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¹¹ Cobb, “Talking the Language of the Larger World,” 162.

¹² Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 168-196; and Cobb, “Talking the Language of the Larger World,” 172-173. For the complexity of black and Indian identities and culture and how they have been inextricably linked and overlapping since the sixteenth century, see James F. Brooks’ collection, *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

Of all the ethnic groups that Martin Luther King Jr. sought out to participate in the campaign, American Indians were the most wary of becoming involved. One reason was that King and SCLC had few contacts among those active in Indian issues, with the exception of black comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory, who had supported fishing rights protests in Washington state. Another more fundamental cause was that while King saw Indians as yet another group of poor people exploited by a white-dominated power structure, many Indian tribal leaders were deeply suspicious of – even hostile to – civil rights goals and strategies. In fact, many of these tribal leaders viewed black interests and demands as not just fundamentally different from Indian concerns, but nearly complete opposites: blacks sought a certain level of acceptance within the white-dominated economy and polity, while Indians wanted what Vine Deloria called “tribal existence within the homeland reservation” in order to protect their culture and unique autonomy.¹³ Of course, some Indians advocated a form of assimilation. But overall a more balanced “tribal existence” remained the dominant response to 100 years of white oppression, from attempts to assimilate Indians by force through the Dawes Severalty Act and boarding schools in the nineteenth century, to the urban relocation of Indian communities and termination of federal reservation support in the twentieth century.¹⁴

¹³ Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 183.

¹⁴ Cobb, “Continuing Encounters: Historical Perspectives” and “Talking the Language of the Larger World,” in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 57-69, 171. For more on these policies, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995); Ruth Spack, *America’s Second Tongue: American Indian Education and the Ownership of English, 1860-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Vine

By the late 1960s, media-driven images of the black freedom struggle had reinforced a lasting negative impression on Indian observers and subsequently shaped their responses to the Poor People's Campaign. Some Indians simply "didn't want to get involved with the black people," recalled Victor Charlo, a Salish and eventual SCLC staff member during the campaign. News footage over several years had done little to discourage Indian suspicions. While a 1963 March on Washington dominated by black and whites conflated legal equality with cultural conformity, television cameras captured looters carrying electronics out of the stores every summer since 1964. Indians "trying to understand Civil Rights" were "completely turned off," wrote Vine Deloria. "... America, rioters seemed to be saying, is a color TV and this is what we want from her."¹⁵ Clearly, such impressions greatly oversimplified the far more varied and nuanced approaches African Americans used to achieve social justice, including those who stressed black control of their communities, politics, and institutions. Yet such generalized impressions of black activism and motives persisted among many Indians. The standard-bearer in pan-Indian advocacy since 1944, the National Congress of Indians (NCAI) fiercely protected Indians' reputation within the Johnson administration as the only ethnic group not to demonstrate, let alone riot, in hopes of a policy reward. NCAI even had a banner declaring "Indians Don't Demonstrate"

Deloria Jr. and Clifford Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Donald L. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000); and James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945-1975* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 186.

proudly hanging at its headquarters – one more way to differentiate the cause of Indians from their black counterparts.¹⁶

Even those who consciously credited civil rights protests as inspiration to their own organizing consistently distanced themselves from the goals, if not the means of, black activism. For instance, the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) had formed in response to what younger activists viewed as NCAI's overreliance on holding meetings and workshops while doing little else to advocate Indian interests. In 1961, after finding a Chicago conference on Indian affairs lacking in creative action, about a dozen young, college-educated Indians from several tribes gathered in Gallup, New Mexico, to launch “not an organization, but a movement,” said Mel Thom, a Paiute from Nevada and the council's first president. He added that, “Organizations rearrange history. Movements make history.”¹⁷ Thom, jokingly called Mao-Tse Thom by friends, viewed NIYC as a blend of old and new tribal cultures. Although also inclined to hold meetings and workshops more than anything else, NIYC's youthful potential represented a bold, new direction – the group met on reservations rather than in cities and it incorporated tribal rituals in a more fundamental way into their meetings. NIYC's willingness to consider other ways to organize became even clearer after co-founder and Ponca activist Clyde Warrior brought Marlon Brando to speak to the group's annual conference in 1963. Attendees rejected the actor's suggestion to join African American civil rights protests, echoing Deloria's argument that African

¹⁶ Cobb, “Talking the Language of the Larger World,” in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 171; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 37. See also Thomas W. Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians: The Founding Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 126-149.

¹⁷ Stan Steiner, *The New Indians* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 40.

Americans sought a fundamentally different relationship with the dominant white culture than Indians did. But the model of direct action protest illustrated by civil rights activists that summer was attractive to at least some NIYC members, including Warrior and an already seasoned 19-year-old activist named Hank Adams.¹⁸

Despite the caution shown by Mel Thom and other NIYC “moderates” toward direct action and its ties to the black movement, such protest was not without recent precedent among some tribes. In the late 1950s, there were at least twenty major demonstrations or nonviolent protests by Indians to protect their land, stop termination, and challenge alleged white brutality and insensitivity in white-Indian interactions. Members of the Six Nations (or Iroquois Confederacy), for instance, used direct action protest to oppose several state projects in New York, with Tuscarora Chief Wallace “Mad Bear” Anderson, a World War II veteran, leading the way. On the grounds of Indian sovereignty, hundreds marched to the Massena, New York, courthouse in 1959 and ripped up summonses for nonpayment of state taxes. In an argument that he echoed nine years later during the Poor People’s Campaign, Anderson told a state official that, “The state does not have the right to govern the Indian people. The only law the Indians recognize is the treaties made with the Federal Government.”¹⁹ A year earlier, Tuscaroras blocked trucks and harassed government employees, successfully deflecting state tactics to buy their land to build a reservoir and

¹⁸ Minutes of the National Indian Youth Council founding conference, August 10-11, 1961, Box 1, Folder 1, Records of the National Indian Youth Council, Center for Southwest Research, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, N.M. (hereafter known as NIYC); Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 42-44; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 39-42; and Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians*, 126-149.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, January 27, 1959.

backflood area. While Tuscaroras deflated tires and blocked roads with fallen trees, Senecas and Mohawks camped on the disputed land. After the state eventually backed down, Miccosukees in Florida called on Anderson to help them repulse a government attempt to take thousands of acres for the Everglades Reclamation Project. Anderson also joined one hundred other Six Nations members in a demonstration outside of the White House. Yet scholars note that these protests were basically intra-tribal in nature, considering the centuries-long history of cooperation among the members of the Six Nations. Although separate tribes technically, they long had acted as one. In contrast, most other tribes did not have this tradition, making NIYC's turn to pan-Indian direct action that much more significant.²⁰

NIYC did not embrace direct action in the fall of 1963, ironically because of its dedication to a decision-making process similar to SNCC, one based upon consensus and respect for all involved. Not until early 1964, when the more "timid stayed away," did Clyde Warrior persuade the council to commit itself to direct action protest, most prominently the "fish-ins" in the Pacific Northwest.²¹ For the small Puyallup, Quinault, Muckleshoot, and Nisqually tribes in Washington state, fishing rights had become a central issue of their survival. Federal treaties long had guaranteed Indian rights to fish in traditional places off the reservation, an economic and cultural necessity if they wanted to maintain practices

²⁰ *New York Times*, July 4, 1958, January 27 and March 14-15, 19-20, 1959, and December 23, 1985; *Washington Post*, March 20, 1959; Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 37-38; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 45; and Guy B. Senese, *Self Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 146-147.

²¹ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 44.

handed down by their ancestors. But slowly state and local governments had chipped away at their ability to do so legally. By the early 1960s, game officials routinely arrested Indians fishing in federally sanctioned “usual and accustomed grounds and stations.” Even after a federal appeals court upheld their rights, state authorities continued such arrests.²² In late 1963 and early 1964, the state closed the entire Green River and part of the Nisqually River from Indian net fishing – prompting local Indian activists including Janet and Don McCloud, Billy Frank Jr., and Al Bridges to form the Survival of American Indians Association (SAIA). The state of Washington had decreed that the steelhead trout “is a white man’s fish,” joked Janet McCloud. “They must think that the steelhead swam over behind the *Mayflower*.”²³ One of their first acts was to contact Jack Tanner, a lawyer from the NAACP’s Northwest Area.²⁴

The fish-ins, as the media dubbed them, paralleled that of African American civil rights activities in striking ways. While local activists prepared to challenge the state legally, they also sought to dramatize their plight and perhaps force federal authorities to intervene on their behalf. This effort was enhanced greatly when a newly emboldened NIYC entered the scene with Marlon Brando, Episcopalian minister John Yaryan, and a car full of young, idealistic Indians. Thanks to the celebrity’s presence, the media documented Brando’s brief attempt at fishing before state game officials apprehended him. Although the prosecutor’s

²² Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 288.

²³ Steiner, *The New Indians*, 55.

²⁴ American Friends Service Committee, *Uncommon Controversy: Fishing Rights of the Muckleshoot, Puyallup and Nisqually Indians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967; 1970), 108; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 59; and Langston, “American Indian Women’s Activism,” 121-124.

office dropped the charges, wishing to avoid making Brando a “martyr,” the incident surpassed local organizers’ expectations.²⁵ Although SAIA activists welcomed the attention and accepted Brando’s (and later Dick Gregory’s) sincerity in assisting, they were deeply skeptical of NIYC intentions. “Brando was sincere, but was with the wrong group,” stated *Survival News*, SAIA’s occasionally published newsletter. “All too often those who come to help are diverted by the publicity seekers,” referring to NIYC.²⁶ Janet McCloud, the newsletter’s editor, registered similar complaints after black comedian Dick Gregory in 1966 came to highlight the fishing rights struggle and ended up garnering much of the publicity himself. Although activists found Gregory to be well-intentioned in his two-year legal struggle after an arrest, they were skeptical of actions by lawyer Jack Tanner and others that stressed Gregory’s civil rights and overshadowed the Indian cause. This distraction also made it more difficult for the tribes’ “so-called renegades” to persuade tribal councils to supplement court action with the fish-ins. “He is trying to turn this into a civil rights issue,” stated Nisqually Tribal Chairman Elmer Kalama. “We are fighting for our fishing rights, and he is hurting our cause.”²⁷

²⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1964.

²⁶ *Survival News*, November 1966, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT.

²⁷ Quote in *Seattle Times*, February 17, 1966. Also *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1964; *Survival News*, [October?] 1966, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT; Hank Adams, interview notes by Oliver Stone, n.d. [1966], Pacific Northwest Regional Office box, “Indian Program – Fishing Rights Controversy, 1966” folder, AFSC; Smith, “Indians, Counter Culture and the New Left,” in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 149-151; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 46. For more on fishing rights, see Wilkinson, *Messages from Frank’s Landing*; and Deloria, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest: From the Coming of the White Man to the Present Day* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

Hank Adams, a new member of NIYC in late 1963, was one of the college-educated youth that local fishing rights activists initially believed to be insincere. Although such feelings never went away completely, Adams proved to be in the fight for the duration, taking him to the Poor People's Campaign in Washington among other places. Called "the most important Indian" by Vine Deloria, Adams was "the key man behind the scenes, the crucial individual who held the line through knowledge, perseverance, and hard work during those times when others shirked the dirty work or failed to see ... the crucial nature of the confrontation."²⁸ Born in Fort Peck, Montana, and raised in Washington state after his mother married a Quinault, Adams became politically active as a fourteen-year-old in response to state assumption of jurisdiction over their reservation. The takeover proved destructive as it lifted tribal alcohol bans and empowered a hostile white police force on the reservation, prompting Quinaults, including Adams, to hold press conferences and lobby the government to reverse the statute. During the next five years, tribal council leaders noticed Adams' work and began to groom him for leadership. Yet, like his NIYC counterparts, he became increasingly disillusioned with tribal leadership. When Clyde Warrior began to push NIYC toward direct action, it piqued Adams' interest.²⁹

During the first fish-ins, Adams was an influential force – but, like Bob Moses or Ella Baker of SNCC, characteristically behind the scenes. Shirley Hill Witt described him later as "a thinker [but] not particularly charismatic."³⁰ For instance, while Clyde Warrior

²⁸ *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975.

²⁹ *Smith and Warrior*, 44-45.

³⁰ Shirley Hill Witt fax to Chris Harrison, January 11, 2000, Box 1, Folder 15, NIYC.

and Mel Thom receive considerable attention in Stan Steiner's early account of the fish-ins and the larger Indian youth movement – folks in “spectacular dress and rhetoric of the militant” – Adams blends into the background.³¹ Yet it was Adams who handled much of the planning. In April 1964, Adams organized a rally of 2,000 at the Washington state capitol in protest of authorities' treatment of fishermen's rights – a protest that Jack Tanner of the NAACP called “ridiculous.”³² Adams wrote press releases and persuaded Charles Kuralt of CBS News to cover the issue. He prompted a number of documentaries and convinced the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to study the fishing rights issue, eventually leading to AFSC's 1966 report *Uncommon Controversy*. And, with only a little more than a year of undergraduate education, Adams became one of the most well-versed experts on Indian treaty law, according to law school-trained men such as the University of Washington's Ralph Johnson. Yet he insisted that those fishermen who sacrificed themselves win the public's accolades. “You have stood alone against the most formidable odds facing Indian people anywhere today,” Adams told the fishermen before a meeting. “There are those who say that your demonstrations and direct action are ‘wrong.’ There are those who say you are nothing but a group of rebels and renegades. On the contrary. It is wrong to surrender our rights in silence.”³³ Adams remained a tireless fighter for fishing rights for years, leaving NIYC in 1966 after the organization had strayed from direct action protest. He kept in touch, however, with Clyde Warrior and Mel Thom. Two years later, he

³¹ *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975.

³² *National Observer*, March 9, 1964, Box 19, Folder 4, NIYC.

³³ Steiner, *The New Indians*, 59.

reunited with them on the eve of the Poor People's Campaign before he became the Indian contingent's lead spokesman in Washington.³⁴

Another strain of protest that grew in popularity among Indians during the so-called Red Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was that of occupation, reflecting the centrality of land, space, and sovereignty both practically and spiritually to native communities. But these did not start with the much-publicized occupations of Alcatraz Island, the BIA headquarters in Washington, and Wounded Knee between 1969 and 1973. Members of the Six Nations, Miccosukee, and Pit River all had squatted during their protests. In 1961, activists in the United Native Americans at the University of California, Berkeley, commandeered an unused bungalow to develop a native cultural center. In 1964, five Sioux regulars at the Bay Area Indian Center chartered a boat to Alcatraz, where the government recently had closed the island prison, to announce their claim of the surplus federal property and to offer to take it off the government's hands. Although prepared to stay a while, they left a few hours later on the advice of their lawyer and at the urgent behest of the island's caretaker. But the idea of regaining lost land, ancestral or just symbolic, remained a powerful one – and a factor for at least some of those Indians who chose to go to Washington in the spring of 1968.³⁵

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³⁴ Steiner, *The New Indians*, 57-64; *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975; Wilkinson, *Messages from Frank's Landing*, 44-46; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 59.

³⁵ Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 16-18, 31, 38.

While the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had little idea on what terms Indians might participate in the campaign, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) did. SCLC's earliest partner in sponsoring the PPC, AFSC had a twenty-year relationship with American Indian activists in the Pacific Northwest fighting relocation and termination and became the first prominent non-Indian organization to support the treaty rights fight. Starting in 1965, AFSC staff and volunteers began to compile material on the fishing rights struggle to help inform the organization's stance, resulting in *Uncommon Controversy*, which was initially published by the National Congress of American Indians and then re-published by an academic press. Although the editors ensured readers that the book did "not speak for any of the Indians, Indian groups, public agencies or private agencies or groups" involved in the fishing rights struggle, the report did help legitimate the fight in white liberal peace and civil rights circles. AFSC's connections to Indian activists, including Hank Adams, would prove invaluable when King and SCLC came calling.³⁶

Initially, however, Tillie Walker became SCLC's conduit to the unknown world of Indian activism and epitomized the enthusiasm some Indians had for King's crusade. Walker, a Mandan from Fort Berthold, North Dakota, was director of the Denver-based United Scholarship Service (USS), a private non-profit foundation that helped guide Indian and ethnic Mexican students into exclusive secondary schools, colleges, and summer internships. Originally founded in 1960 to give small scholarships to Indian and Mexican college students, Vine Deloria Jr. (a prep school graduate himself), Walker, and others had

³⁶ "Resumé of Pacific Northwest Regional Indian Program for Fundraising Purposes," in Pacific Northwest Regional Office box, "Indian Program – General" folder, AFSC; *Uncommon Controversy*, vii-xi; and Wilkinson, *Messages from Frank's Landing*, 46.

transformed the group into the largest organization of its kind serving those minority communities. As USS director, Walker had developed relationships with many social justice organizations, including AFSC. She was considered “a sort of big sister” to the NIYC and has been credited for imploring Clyde Warrior to enter alcohol rehab. When SCLC’s Bernard Lafayette and Tom Houck requested help as they desperately recruited in the winter of 1968, her name joined thousands of other on lists of potential participants. Unlike many others, however, she responded affirmatively, even enthusiastically. “Tillie would call me everyday to find out what I was doing,” Houck said, “and she worked in the Indian contacts a lot.”³⁷ According to Walker, she saw in the poverty of Mississippi her home reservation: “I saw that if you are poor in Mississippi and you are poor in North Dakota, it’s all the same thing. You’re fighting the same battle.”³⁸ After finding out that other Indian activists she knew did not plan to attend King’s Minority Group Conference, she went to Atlanta herself – even though she did not consider herself “an Indian leader.” Joining her there were NIYC veterans Hank Adams and Mel Thom, Rose Crow Flies High of North Dakota’s Three Affiliated Tribes, the Sioux Council’s Ray Berry, Cecil Corbett of Arizona’s Indian Ministries, Thadis Oxendine of the Lumbee Indian Citizens Council in North Carolina, and several members of the eastern band of the Cherokees.³⁹

³⁷ Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon.

³⁸ Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

³⁹ Tom Houck and Tillie Walker, interviews by Kay Shannon; “American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People’s Washington Campaign,” SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People’s Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 46-47, 56, 90-91. In the last installment of his King trilogy, Taylor Branch also places American Indian Movement (AIM) co-founder Dennis Banks in Atlanta, but according to Banks’ own autobiography,

While those Indians who attended saw great potential in the campaign as King described it, they also brought genuine concerns to the table. After receiving a primer on Indian issues, the SCLC leader offered considerable support for their unique agenda of strengthened treaty rights and self-determination, blended with more routine urban needs. Reies Tijerina's prominent voice, despite monopolizing the meeting at times, also reassured Indians that treaty interests would not be forgotten. Yet, many Indian activists still worried that the campaign would prove to be nothing more than "a NEGRO movement," as Walker and Adams reiterated a week later.⁴⁰ Adams even believed that SCLC may have "made a mistake" by inviting Indian leaders because the government easily could respond with more funding for tribal governments, creating 6,000 more bureaucrats and considerable native opposition to the campaign. In some ways, he was correct. At first, Walker's tribal council at Fort Berthold had wholeheartedly endorsed the campaign. It "started off so great because they passed a resolution that they would back (the campaign)," she stated, and then they spread the word by having "community meetings all over."⁴¹ Walker believed that this was essential to persuading a sizable number of the reservation's unemployed to go to Washington. But then the superintendent of the local War on Poverty program advised the council to oppose campaign participation. "Indians had too much going for them to join

he was in jail until May 1968. SCLC records also do not mention Banks' presence. See Dennis Banks with Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 60-61; and Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 715.

⁴⁰ Lares Tresjan and Sandra Green, minutes of Committee of 100 meeting, undated [March 21, 1968?], 1-2, 4, "PPC Steering Committee," Box 2101, NWRO.

⁴¹ Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

any movement like this,” Walker said, paraphrasing the superintendent’s argument. In other words, tribes could lose benefits such as the expanded funding for Head Start and community action programs proposed by President Johnson in his recent “Forgotten American” address on American Indians.⁴² “And so the tribal council turned around and started fighting this whole thing and that made me more determined that a government agency wasn’t going to stop me.”⁴³

During the next month and a half, Walker succeeded in building a viable Indian contingent for the campaign, one that had the potential to strengthen pan-Indian ties. Some had been on board from the beginning, agreeing with Walker that the campaign offered a rare opportunity to seek governmental redress. Others, such as Vic Charlo, had epiphanies after King’s death, not unlike many other black, white, and Mexican participants initially skeptical of the campaign. Charlo, a great-grandson of Salish Chief Charlo from the Bitterroot Valley in Montana, recalled responding to King’s death as, “I gotta’ do something, and I didn’t know what. Then this came up.” Charlo had been working as a trainer at the University of Utah for the Office of Economic Opportunity and “did not consider myself a

⁴² Lyndon Johnson, “The Forgotten American,” March 6, 1968, Box 74, “The American Indian” folder, LBJ Aides – Joseph Califano, Special Assistant to the President, LBJ. In the address, the president embraced “a goal that ends the old debate about ‘termination’ of Indian programs and stresses self-determination; a goal that erases old attitudes of paternalism and promotes partnership and self-help.” He proposed millions of dollars more for Indian schools, community centers, college scholarships, health care aides, vocational training, and reservation infrastructure. The administration’s timing for a new Indian policy proved fortuitous, but I have found little evidence to suggest a deliberate attempt to blunt Indian participation in the campaign.

⁴³ Quote by Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon. Also, Eleanor Eaton memo to Moffett, April 2, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32556, “Minority Leaders Conference Washington's Poor People's Campaign,” AFSC.

liberal.” But when Walker called, he responded enthusiastically – a decision that he says changed his career path for good.⁴⁴

By the end of April, Indians had substantial representation in the campaign’s vanguard action, the Committee of 100, and its public demands. Joining Walker in Washington were Indians from across the country, including those from the Atlanta conference and others such as Teresa Bridges and Edith McCloud from the Survival of American Indians Association in Washington state, Leo LeClair and Robert Dumont of the NIYC, and Martha Grass and Andrew Dreadfulwater, War on Poverty activists from Oklahoma. In Washington, as part of the campaign’s opening salvo, Mel Thom and Ralph Abernathy unveiled an initial list of Indian-specific demands to Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Robert Bennett. Declaring that “the Indian system is sick, paternalism is the virus, and the Secretary of the Interior is the carrier,” Mel Thom laid out a series of policy proposals, nearly all of which called for greater autonomy within the reservation system.⁴⁵ Indians did not want a return to the devastating policy of “termination,” in which the government dropped all financial support, but one that allowed tribes to choose their own superintendents and their own school principals and

⁴⁴ Victor Charlo, interview by author, February 22, 2007, by telephone. Chief Charlo won notoriety in the late nineteenth century for leading a twenty-year resistance movement against federal efforts to move the Salish from the Bitterroot Valley to the Flathead reservation in what was then the Montana Territory. Victor Charlo’s brother, Louis, was one of the original flag-raisers at the World War II battle of Iwo Jima. In perhaps the most well-recorded flag-raising in history, Ira Hayes, a Pima, and five others replaced that original flag with a much larger one. *Weekly Missoulian* (Missoula, Montana Territory), April 26, 1876; and *Missoulian*, October 21, 2006.

⁴⁵ “Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor Presented to Agencies of the U.S. Government by the Poor People’s Campaign and Its Committee of 100,” 45, April 29-30, 1968, Box 177, Folder 24, SCLC.

administrators, permitted them to tax railroads for using their land, and recognized the advantages of bi-cultural education and an expansion of local control. Calling gradual measures to include tribes in some decision-making “tokenism,” Thom stated further that, “we make it unequivocally clear that Indian people have the right to *separate and equal* communities within the American system; our own communities that are institutionally and politically separate and socially equal and secure within the American system” (emphasis added).⁴⁶

Interestingly, Thom’s statement made no mention of the recently passed and controversial Indian Civil Rights Act (ICRA) of 1968, part of the larger civil rights bill banning racial discrimination in housing. Two weeks earlier, President Johnson had signed the bill into law, calling it one of the “promises of a century. . . . With this bill, the voice of justice speaks again. It proclaims that fair housing for all . . . is now the American way of life.”⁴⁷ Because King’s death had made it politically possible, fair housing legislation proved a bittersweet victory for the liberals and civil rights activists who had long sought it. But while most blacks and some whites embraced a frontal assault on residential segregation as a positive reform, tribal activists viewed the act’s Indian provisions with some uncertainty. In what U.S. Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina had intended as a “poison pill” to derail civil rights legislation, late additions to the act included language bringing the country’s approximately 550 Indian nations under the full force of the Bill of Rights, specifically formalizing the tribal courts into entities more in line with the federal judiciary. Ervin’s

⁴⁶ “Statements of Demands,” 45-49.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, April 12, 1968.

attempt to pit black versus Indian backfired when Congressman Ben Raifel, a Sioux and conservative Republican from South Dakota, supported the legislation. For those Indians interested in greater individual protections under U.S. law, including religious freedom, the act was a triumph. But other activists saw the bill as introducing a dangerous federal intrusion on tribal sovereignty that, in the words of Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford Lytle, “greatly complicated the lives of Indians. . . . The informality of Indian life that had been the repository of cultural traditions and customs was suddenly abolished, and in its place came the rigid requirements . . . The ICRA basically distorted reservation life.⁴⁸ Yet, ICRA’s influence, good or bad, did not surface in campaign rhetoric. Most likely, this omission reflected SCLC’s continued murky understanding of Indian issues. From SCLC’s perspective, how could such a civil rights bill be anything other than triumphant?⁴⁹

The actions of the Committee of 100 received generally positive media reports, although Indian participation was all but ignored – even by Marxist newspapers such as the *Worker*. Yet, this did not seem to slow recruitment efforts by Tillie Walker, Hank Adams, and others. Indeed, a couple of hundred Indians in all, from more than a dozen tribes mostly in the West, committed themselves to the long trek to Washington. Walker had persuaded other established Indian leaders to join the effort, including eastern tribes’ Mad Bear Anderson of the Iroquois Confederacy and Chief Francis, a Passamaquoddy from

⁴⁸ Deloria and Lytle, *The Nations Within*, 211, 213.

⁴⁹ Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 (25 U.S.C. 1301-03), www.tribal-institute.org/lists/icra1968.htm, accessed June 10, 2007; *New York Times*, April 12, 1968; Deloria and Lytle, *The Nations Within*, 200-214; and Taiawagi Helton and Lindsay G. Robertson, “The Foundations of Federal Indian Law and Its Application in the Twentieth Century,” in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 43-44.

Maine who planned to attend “to demand milk for my people.”⁵⁰ Hank Adams convinced skeptical SAIA members, such as veteran fisherman Al Bridges, to send a contingent to lobby the federal courts directly, in order to “keep fishing and keep living.”⁵¹ Even Reies Tijerina, who prided himself on his indigenous roots as a Chicano activist, received commitments to march from Hopi chief Thomas Banyacya in Arizona and Reverend Clifton Hill of the Creek Centralization Committee in Oklahoma. Despite different fundamental solutions to poverty, Indian organizers were able to sell their brethren on a black-led march – a reflection of how the PPC captured the imagination.⁵²

While King’s assassination changed the heart of some black and ethnic Mexican marchers about participating, his death did not have the same impact on Indians. As a result, a younger group of individuals emerged as representatives of Indian issues in Washington. In addition to the opposition of tribal councils such as Fort Berthold’s, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) remained opposed to Indian participation. Repeating their mantra that civil rights-style protests were “not the Indian way,” NCAI officials echoed the mainstream media in dismissing the Committee of 100’s demands as too vague. Instead, NCAI championed negotiation with a dash of publicity, condemning negative media portrayals of Indians and working with industrialists to improve employment opportunities in the first months of 1968. Although he had left the NCAI leadership a year

⁵⁰ *The Worker*, May 19, 1968.

⁵¹ *The Worker*, May 28, 1968.

⁵² Steiner, *The New Indians*, 5-6; Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon; Clifton Hill letter to Tijerina, April 21, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT; and Gollin, *The Demography of Protest*, 11-12.

earlier, Vine Deloria Jr. concurred with the organization's stance on the PPC, remaining an observer from afar. Even Clyde Warrior, who had been excited about the campaign, passed – although for very different reasons. But by the spring of 1968, at age 28, his liver was ravaged by years of alcohol abuse. After his mother died, Warrior and his family moved back to Ponca City, Oklahoma, to be near his grandparents, and in the process began drinking again. Just days after Resurrection City fell, Hank Adams, Mel Thom, Vic Charlo, and others gathered in Oklahoma to bury Clyde Warrior and, with him, one of the most influential voices in American Indian activism.⁵³

The most dramatic opposition to the PPC, however, came a few weeks into the campaign when Kahn-Tineta Horn confronted Ralph Abernathy at a press conference. While scholars routinely interpret the incident as yet another demonstration of Abernathy's poor leadership, Horn's challenge reflected both SCLC paternalism and legitimate differences in how African Americans and American Indians constructed solutions to their respective poverties. A Mohawk, Canadian, and former model and "Princess Canada," Horn interrupted Abernathy and handed him a letter expressing dismay in the campaign's "exploitation of Indians in your activities." Representing the delegates of the National Aboriginal Traditional Conference, an annual meeting for culturally traditional Indians from North America, Horn was careful to "congratulate you and all of those who have dedicated themselves to this worthy cause." Horn wrote:

⁵³ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 56-59; *New York Times*, December 16, 1967, March 22 and May 12, 1968; *The Worker*, May 14, 1968; Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians*, 155; and Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 129.

We believe that you may have invited Indians to join you from the generosity of your heart. Unfortunately your goodness and your enthusiasm exceeds your knowledge. You are not aware of the real needs of Indians and surely you do not know of the potential damage that Indians may sustain by merging their claims with those of the Negro problem.⁵⁴

Horn then laid out briefly why African Americans and American Indians had little in common other than poverty, calling it “merely a common agony which is not sufficient to unite Indian, White or Negro society.” Not only were they unwilling to abdicate leadership to blacks “or any other race other than Indian,” they also rejected “white man’s religions and intrusion of Christianity,” “the motivations of Negroes and those of Whites ... (including) ambition, effort, discipline, acquisition, possession, competition, and destruction,” and the “flagrant publicity seeking militant acts.” Therefore, she took offense at both the campaign’s style and substance. Buried in Horn’s lengthy critique was the sentiment that Indians could not afford to anger the wrong people: “There are those enemies of the Negro people ... who may well become enemies of Indians if the interests of the two groups are not made explicit.”⁵⁵

The confrontation surprised Abernathy, who seemed genuinely puzzled by Indian opposition to SCLC’s program. He responded that his organization greatly respected Indian issues, as well as Indian independence, but that the campaign’s proposed solutions would help everyone. Much later, Abernathy complained bitterly of what he called Indians’ “private agenda.”⁵⁶ His complaints seem unfounded since SCLC officials knew since the

⁵⁴ Kahn-Tineta Horn letter to Ralph Abernathy, June 10, 1968, page 1, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

⁵⁵ Kahn-Tineta Horn letter to Ralph Abernathy, June 10, 1968, pages 1-4, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

⁵⁶ Abernathy, *And the Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 520.

Minority Group Conference that Indian and black policy interests were not identical. But Horn's criticism of the campaign, at least her strong rhetoric against "flagrant publicity seeking militant acts," was exaggerated. During the eighteen months after the Washington confrontation, Kahn-Tineta Horn gained her own notoriety as a "militant." She participated in a variety of high-profile demonstrations, including a blockade of an international bridge between Canada and the United States regarding Indians' refusal to pay customs duties.⁵⁷

On the surface, it seems fitting that those Indians living on reservations – still the majority in the late 1960s – were the most vocal critics of native involvement in the Poor People's Campaign. Indians living on reservations were most cognizant of the differences between their own issues of treaty, land, and fishing rights and those of more urban dwellers, whether they were black, white, or Mexican. As Kahn-Tineta Horn argued in her letter to Abernathy, "The problems of Negroes are living conditions in cities, housing, employment, and quality of opportunity. There is no relationship of the problems of the two groups."⁵⁸ NCAI, mostly made up of tribal and former Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, took a similar tack. Yet, for the most part, it was not urban Indians who attended the campaign. Rather, those most identified with the reservations arrived in larger numbers, driven by their disgust with unelected tribal government leadership, which was often rife with corruption, favoritism, and timidity. "We do not understand why Indian tribes cannot select their own Superintendents," Indian campaign leadership wrote Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall.

⁵⁷ *Washington Post*, July 13 and December 19, 1968; *Akwesasne Notes*, May and June 1969; *New York Times*, January 16, 1966; and Steiner, *The New Indians*, 229.

⁵⁸ Kahn-Tineta Horn letter to Ralph Abernathy, June 10, 1968, pages 1-4, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

“The political structure is systematically controlled by the government and special interest groups who exploit us.”⁵⁹ But this does not answer why, with the exception of Tillie Walker and Vic Charlo, the growing population of Indians in the cities remained unrepresented at the PPC. Why would they stay away, especially if campaign demands supposedly resonated with urban sensibilities and needs?

The Indian experience in Chicago offers one potential answer. Echoing the concerns of Horn, Deloria, and others, urban Indians avoided close affiliations with African Americans for fear of being overshadowed. Home to a small but growing native community, Chicago witnessed its share of tensions between Indians and other groups, the former often expressing to relocation officials an apprehension with living near blacks. In his study of the “Indian metropolis,” for example, James LaGrand attributes such attitudes toward a variety of fears, from their children being picked on and beaten, to the point “that whites might come to view them as just another of the city’s minority groups,” which meant integration into the majority culture. That was unacceptable because, quoting one Winnebago-Sioux, the “Negro’s culture ... is obtained from the white man.”⁶⁰ Of course, this view ignored not just the fluidity of culture but also many tribal members’ patterns of intermarrying with African Americans, as had been the case with Cherokees. Yet, such attitudes persisted and contributed to Indian concentration in the city’s Uptown area, an enclave of poor migrants, including recent white arrivals from the coal fields of Appalachia.

⁵⁹ American Indian Statement by Coalition of American Indian Citizens, n.d., Box 28, Folder 6, NIYC.

⁶⁰ LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis*, 120-121.

Despite Uptown's role as a key recruiting space for the PPC through the JOIN Community Union, the area's Indians stayed home. According to Billy Hollins, one of SCLC's lead campaign coordinators in the Midwest, he recruited Indians, but not in Chicago. "I found where Indians were," he said, in small reservations in Michigan and Indiana, as if some did not live in Chicago. Hollins added that it did not help that SCLC's lead voice in Chicago, Jesse Jackson, "had a patented thing he said" while recruiting for the campaign, "so he was just talking about black problems. He didn't really deal with the Indians ... he didn't really talk about that."⁶¹ At least in this case, Indian concerns with being lost in the shuffle seemed well-founded.⁶²

* * *

In mid-May, more than one hundred Indians left for Washington, D.C., and began a journey many would never forget. Campaign coordinators dubbed the caravan from the Northwest the "Indian Trail." This caravan started with an estimated eighty people and boasted the most Indian participants, including Hank Adams and his fellow fishing rights activists, Mandans, members of the Three Affiliated Tribes, and others from the Dakotas, Montana, and Minnesota. Hopis joined the Southwest Caravan, as did Mad Bear Anderson, Tillie Walker, and Creeks, Cherokees, and others from Oklahoma. Other caravans also had a smattering of native activists. In all, a conservative estimate from the period had more

⁶¹ Billy Hollins, interview by author.

⁶² LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis*, 118-121.

than a dozen tribes from at least eight states represented in the Washington phase of the campaign.⁶³

Indians' experiences during the 3,000-mile journey across the country were not fully recorded. While they made up the majority of individuals on the Indian Trail, they remained a small minority in the other caravans. At least on the Southwest Caravan, in which Reies Tijerina and Corky Gonzales took lead roles, Indians maintained a higher profile, although not always in a way to their liking. In both Albuquerque and Denver, Indians prominently shared the stage with Tijerina, Abernathy, and Gonzales, giving speeches and captivating the crowd. In New Mexico, Mad Bear Anderson and a 120-year-old Hopi named Katchongva greeted onlookers, while Mandans Bert Yellow Wolf (Chief Jichk), Donald Malnourie, and Ted Baker helped kick off a Denver rally with Indian folk songs. "Nobody knows what poor is like the Indians," declared Fred Carr, a Crow from Montana. "Nobody has seen horses starving and dead in their own land. The only reason I grew up is because I am mad."⁶⁴ When the caravan arrived in St. Louis two days later, Gonzales and members of the Crusade for Justice insisted that other marchers fall in behind the Indians in order to cross the Mississippi River. Arguing that the "first Americans" needed to cross the symbolic gateway to the West (or East, depending on the perspective), Gonzales echoed an earlier call by Tijerina to put Indian interests first. "[I]f Native Americans did not obtain justice,

⁶³ *People's World*, May 19 and June 15, 1968; *The Worker*, May 12, 1968; Gollin, *Demography of Protest*, 16; and Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon. Only the Southern Caravan seemed devoid of Indian participants, perhaps explaining marchers shouting, "There's an Indian there!" after seeing Cherokees in western North Carolina dressed in "greasepaint and long mantles of bright feathers" dancing in front of "phony cement wigwams." *People's World*, May 18, 1968.

⁶⁴ *People's World*, June 1, 1968.

nobody could,” Tijerina recalled. “If we do not ask for the Native Americans first, then we are not asking for us.”⁶⁵ Both Chicano leaders were proud of their indigenous heritage – or what Tijerina called his *indohispano* identity – and this sometimes translated into such generous gestures as Indians leading the way into East St. Louis. But this attitude, particularly Tijerina’s, also risked replacing the story of imperialism with an arrogant interpretation that Chicanos had Indians’ best interests in mind.⁶⁶

When the western contingents arrived in Washington, Indian participants shared ethnic Mexicans’ disappointment in the state of Resurrection City and then demonstrated their characteristic independence. Most joined the rest of the Southwest Caravan and stayed in the Hawthorne School, before moving to St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church, a block and a half from Hawthorne, and eventually to Resurrection City during the last week. “I really enjoyed” Resurrection City, said Tillie Walker. “We had this area that was quite friendly.”⁶⁷ She added that, despite the city’s media-driven reputation for unrest, they were not touched by conflict there. But the nature of their living arrangements for most of the campaign helped reinforce the Indian participants’ close-knit group. Marchers remembered Indians keeping to themselves and rarely consulted with others. After temporarily moving into Hawthorne, “the Indians on their own, just overnight, evaporated,” recalled Ernesto Vigil. He remembered Corky Gonzales chuckling about it, saying, “Indians have their own way of

⁶⁵ Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 107.

⁶⁶ *People’s World*, May 18, 25 and June 1, 1968; *Rocky Mountain News*, May 20, 1968; Ralph Ramirez, interview by author; and Rudy and Gerry Gonzales, interview by author.

⁶⁷ Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

doing things and they don't consult with other people who aren't Indians. They know what they're doing and they do things their way."⁶⁸ What Gonzales left unsaid was that not only did Indians value their independence, but they had no reason to expect either assistance or understanding from non-Indians who, for generations, ignored native wishes.⁶⁹

Although they indeed were a tighter group than their counterparts, Indians occasionally reached out to others, with mixed success. The protest outside the Supreme Court building became the most prominent Indian-led demonstration of the march, in both participation by other groups and the media attention it attracted. Devised by Hank Adams, the noisy demonstration by hundreds of protesters outside the nation's highest court emerged after several more fishing rights activists were arrested in Washington state. Judging the proposal as an ill-considered gambit that would result in everyone's arrest, Hosea Williams and other aides to Ralph Abernathy initially refused to disturb the SCLC president to propose the idea. A few days earlier, Mad Bear Anderson and a few other Indian leaders threatened to leave the march because they felt "ignored" and "abused" by SCLC leaders. They sought "an apology from SCLC, an extended hand" – a sentiment Tillie Walker confirmed later. "I think the biggest problem (is) that this is a black movement," she said soon after the campaign's Washington phase ended. "And this is the biggest problem that we've faced throughout the whole campaign."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

⁶⁹ Frieda Wagner, Pomo, interview by Kay Shannon, July 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

⁷⁰ Quote by Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon. Also, Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 107-112; and *New York Times*, May 26, 1968.

The Indian chiefs received SCLC assurances only after they turned to Tijerina as an ally and go-between – a role he played again on the eve of the protest demonstration. “Request your assistance in bringing full support of SCLC, Resurrection City population, and Black community to this active presentation of issues,” wrote Adams in a shorthand note to Tijerina. Adams added that he “would hope for central focus on these Indian issues tomorrow – limiting other PPC activities as much as possible.”⁷¹ Eventually, Tijerina persuaded the reluctant Abernathy to sanction the rally, although neither Adams nor Mad Bear Anderson wanted SCLC or the Alianza “leading” the way. Abernathy’s concern about arrests was a real possibility, as Adams warned that “most of the Indian group – all of Northwest – prepared to go to jail for sit-in or any such action.”⁷² Not only was the SCLC leadership wary of mass arrests, Abernathy’s experience told him that protesting outside of the court – complete with a slow, mournful banging of drums and the smoking of elaborate pipes – most likely would not produce the desired response from authorities. Besides, it had become clear that Abernathy was most comfortable utilizing the small Indian presence symbolically, and some said rather comically, such as asking a headdress-wearing chief to grant marchers his permission to use the land on the Washington Mall.⁷³

Despite the chaos that ensued outside of the Supreme Court building and the thundering condemnations by the mass media, many of its participants believed they had

⁷¹ Hank Adams note to Reies Tijerina, May 28, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT.

⁷² Hank Adams note to Reies Tijerina, May 28, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT.

⁷³ Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 107-112; PPC New Mexico delegation press release, May 29, 1968, Box 31, Folder 21, RLT; *New York Times*, May 26, 1968; Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 108; Abernathy, *And the Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 518-521; and *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1968.

sent a constructive message to the court and the public. Reies Tijerina declared the protest a “monumental victory” because the court’s chief clerk, John Davis, agreed to speak with a delegation of twenty-one protesters, including seventeen Indians. “Nations that trembled before the United States were perplexed at seeing what these people had done with the judges in the palace of the judicial emperors,” Tijerina later wrote.⁷⁴ Although this could be dismissed as Tijerina’s typical hyperbolic rhetoric, his point was confirmed by others. Court officials said later that it was unprecedented for the court even to accept a petition from a protesting group. And in striking down so-called “man-in-the-house” welfare provisions in *King v. Smith*, the justices seem to comment obliquely on the campaign raging outside. “The causes of and cures for poverty are currently the subject of much debate,” wrote Chief Justice Earl Warren.⁷⁵

While the demonstrators believed that they had sent a powerful message to the government, the Supreme Court demonstration and its aftermath once again highlighted how fragile the campaign’s interethnic alliances were, as well as the campaign’s central paradox: its potential for unity and disunity. Reies Tijerina, who insisted on speaking for Indian interests much of the time, also contributed to this reality. As a self-described *indobispano*, Tijerina not only recognized the indigenous roots of his *mestizaje*, but also the commonalities between the treaty rights fight of many Indians and his own struggle for land

⁷⁴ Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 112.

⁷⁵ Quote in *King v. Smith*, 392 U.S. 309 (1968). Also Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 112; and *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, May 30, 1968.

grants in the Southwest.⁷⁶ Both recognized the power of the judiciary in sustaining what they deemed unfair treatment as well as resolving those problems. Although he never formally received a law degree, Hank Adams by the late 1960s had taught himself Indian treaty law, which he put to good use in helping win greater recognition of Northwest Indians' fishing rights. For the most part, Tijerina left the legal expertise to others, but understood that his political efforts worked in tandem with the legal challenges upon which judges sooner or later ruled – including those land grant lawsuits that continue today. Tijerina had developed a good relationship with Thomas Banyacya, a Hopi spiritual leader from Arizona, which had tied Tijerina into a larger network of traditional native leadership. Thus, Tijerina had some credibility when he spoke to the press and SCLC leadership about Indian concern – from the Minority Group Conference in March to his role mediating the Supreme Court protest and Mad Bear Anderson's near departure.⁷⁷

Yet, Tijerina's insistence on speaking *for* Indians – as if his interests were identical to theirs – was more than a bit irritating to some Indian activists. It also echoed some of the sexism that Chicana activists encountered in their dealings with Tijerina. For instance, Tillie Walker recalled a moment when the Indian contingent chose Martha Grass, a poor mother of eleven from Oklahoma, as a spokeswoman. Tijerina argued that Grass did not speak for Indians and suggested someone else,

⁷⁶ In both contemporary speeches and his autobiography, Tijerina used the term “indohispano” to acknowledge the indigenous as well as Hispanic aspects of his *mestizaje* identity. See Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, xv.

⁷⁷ *New York Times*, May 26, 1968; FBI field report, Albuquerque, December 27, 1967, Box 2, Folder 23, RLT; Tijerina, *They Called Me King Tiger*, 171; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 122-123; and *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975.

[A]nd I just laughed. ... I just told them you have no business trying to choose our leaders. We know who we want to follow and I think our group is small enough so we know who is who within it. And we knew who we wanted in it and we knew we wanted Martha Grass to speak ... as a person who comes from a community where there was a lot of discrimination against Indian people and as a person who did a beautiful job of speaking.⁷⁸

Tijerina accused Walker of being middle class and thus somehow illegitimate. Granted, Walker's United Scholarship Service served Indians seeking middle class credentials more than anyone else, but gender also infused this altercation with Tijerina. Nearly half of the Indian contingent were women such as Walker, Rose Crow Flies High, Martha Grass, and Alice Blackhorse, all of whom showed tremendous leadership behind the scenes during the campaign. From Walker's careful financial bookkeeping to the inspiring words of Grass and Blackhorse, native women offered a style quite different from Tijerina's bombast.⁷⁹

During the next several weeks, these women helped lead the Indian delegation in other protests, although no other demonstration captured the public's attention like the breaking of Supreme Court windows. Indeed, one demonstration targeted the National Press Club building over media coverage of the campaign and Indian issues in general. The delegation declared in a press release:

American Indians have [been] and continue to be exploited by a news service that leans heavily towards sensationalism. The real issues are avoided so that White America does not have to test their consciences. ... Instead of reporting to the American Public about the real issues that involves the right of Indian tribes to fish for their basic subsistence, the press headlines about the broken windows. ... The windows can be replaced at a small cost in comparison to the human suffering caused by the ruling of the Supreme Court.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

⁷⁹ Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, interview by author, September 2, 2007, by telephone.

⁸⁰ "Statement to National and International Press," June 11, 1968, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

Not surprisingly, only a few press outlets even acknowledged the event and those that did buried the story deep inside another campaign-related report. Even less was made of the delegation's protest against the "merciless slaughter and extermination" of indigenous populations in Brazil, whose military dictatorship was a close U.S. economic and political ally in the Cold War.⁸¹ The brief occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building, repeated two years later on a much larger scale to considerable publicity, received no comment. And Hank Adams continued to spearhead attempts at publicity for those fishing rights activists languishing in legal limbo in the Pacific Northwest. But perhaps it was activists' meeting at the Department of Interior that proved most disconcerting in retrospect. They met with lame-duck Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, who listened for ninety minutes and then apologized for federal paternalism before serving the Indian delegation coffee and cake. Neither the meeting with Udall nor any of the other actions could be called successful in any conventional, policy-oriented way – a point made by Vine Deloria, who called the marchers "sitting ducks for the pros of Interior."⁸²

Yet despite their marginalization by the campaign's black leadership and paternalism by some ethnic Mexicans, Indian marchers believed that the overall experience had been worthwhile and important to the welfare of American Indians in general. The campaign

⁸¹ "Statement of Indian People of the Poor People's Campaign," June 1, 1968, Box 32, Folder 2, RL.T.

⁸² Quote in Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 183. See also *Washington Post*, June 4 and 6, 1968; *People's World*, June 22 and 29, 1968; and Edward C. Johnson, Northern Paiute, in *Indian Self-Rule: Firsthand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan*, ed. Kenneth R. Philp (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986), 188.

offered both the glimpse of interethnic collaboration's potential, while it strengthened the notion that Indians had to band together and be creative in their making a case for Indian activism beyond the staid methods of NCAI and most tribal governments. Acknowledging that they had failed to persuade officials to embrace sympathetic Indian policies proposed in Congress, Hank Adams said that the campaign instead had sparked a "responsible revolution" among U.S. tribes, a foundation on which to build Indian pressure for reform in the next Congress. Part of that process included a newly formed organization called the Coalition of Indian Citizens, as well as participation in the interethnic Poor People's Embassy. Despite great promise, neither organization made much of an institutional impact. Instead, they represented a loose network of Indians and their sympathizers for future action, which at least for Tillie Walker was an important step on its own: "We have never been involved in anything larger than our own groups. In fact ... except for attending Urban Indian Conferences which there are a lot of tribal groups ... this is the first time tribal groups have worked together in this way."⁸³ Adams, who at 25 years old chalked up the campaign as another chapter in his own political education, tapped this network for a new wave of fish-ins and related protests in Washington state.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, other American Indians emphasized their own personal development. Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, a Lakota from Denver and granddaughter of Alice Blackhorse, called

⁸³ Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

⁸⁴ Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 183; *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975; *Daily World*, October 29, 1968; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 98-99.

the campaign a “great opportunity for everybody to pull together.”⁸⁵ But it also proved transformative for her personally as Indian activists in Denver chose her to speak about the campaign at community events. If anything, she said, the experience forced her to overcome her bashfulness in front of white church crowds. Twenty-five years after the campaign, one scholar suggests that Rose Crow Flies High “embedded the experience of the Poor People’s March in her cultural autobiography with as much salience and historical recall” as key historical moments in her own Mandan-Hidatsa tribe.⁸⁶ Ironically, it was in Washington, D.C., where she helped hone an alternate model for women’s leadership – one which eventually made her the tribe’s first chairwoman. And for Victor Charlo, the campaign was “an eye-opener.” As a young activist, Charlo had the chance to address the Bureau of Indian Affairs director, sit in jail with NIYC founder Mel Thom, and share stories and observations with folks of other ethnicities. Such conversations offered lessons on how their black or Chicano counterparts looked at the world. One comment that stayed with him forty years later was the observation by one PPC organizer who, commenting on the Washington Monument with its white peak and red lights, said: “Doesn’t that look like a Ku Klux Klanner?”⁸⁷

For all of these individuals, a key lesson had been reinforced, if not learned for the first time. Vic Charlo’s experience captured it. He initially believed that the answers to his

⁸⁵ Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, interview by author.

⁸⁶ Tressa Berman, *Circle of Goods: Women, Work, and Welfare in a Reservation Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 83.

⁸⁷ Victor Charlo, interview by author.

tribe's troubles, especially its poverty, might be in the nation's capital. But "[i]t wasn't in Washington, D.C.," he stated. "It was in the community, it was with the community. That's what I learned. So instead of working in Washington, D.C., the important place was at home. So that's what I did. I came home and became a teacher."⁸⁸ Younger Indians in particular, such as Hank Adams, Tillie Walker, and Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, left Washington with this clear understanding that broad connections were important but the hardest work had to be conducted at home – that simply asking Congress and federal agencies to show sympathy toward the “forgotten American” was not effective. During the next several years, many other American Indians who did not march followed the lead of Indian campaigners, including activists in Minneapolis, Denver, and other urban locales that transformed American Indian activism into “red power.”

* * *

In contrast to American Indians and ethnic Mexicans, whites were quite familiar with the activities of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. From the many social justice activists who marched and protested with King to the liberals who helped underwrite his organization, King and SCLC had created a network of white sympathizers of the freedom struggle. Most of these people, however, were middle class with few direct ties to the constituencies King sought for his new campaign. The challenge to campaign coordinator Bernard Lafayette and “minority group” organizer Tom Houck then was to find genuinely poor white people to attend. That objective, to find the “poorest of the poor,” led them to

⁸⁸ Victor Charlo, interview by author.

the same area President Johnson visited when launching the War on Poverty in 1964: Appalachia. Through the contacts of the American Friends Service Committee and the Tennessee-based Highlander Folk School, the latter where King and other civil rights organizers had participated in activist workshops in the 1950s, campaign officials tapped into existing anti-poverty networks in primarily Kentucky and West Virginia. On this foundation PPC organizers built one of the most impressive biracial coalitions of poor people ever to emerge from the Appalachian region.⁸⁹

Although War on Poverty programs in Appalachia had been part of the federal “rediscovery” of the poor in the early 1960s, anti-poverty activism had much deeper roots in the coal-mining regions of the mountains. Long the site of massive unionization efforts by coal miners and railroad workers, the region had witnessed the rise, fall, and rise again of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) during the first half of the twentieth century. Highly publicized battles between management and those seeking collective bargaining captured national headlines during the Great Depression, most prominently the bloody strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, and resulted in greater rights, wages, and benefits for families caught in the vice of the operators’ company towns. But by the 1960s, UMWA under long-time President John L. Lewis had grown conservative and acquiescent as mining conditions stagnated, or even worsened. Increasingly, the union seemed to walk in lockstep

⁸⁹ Mike Clark, interview by Robert Chase, November 26, 1997, by telephone, in author’s possession; Ernie Austin and Tom Houck, interviews by Kay Shannon; Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; and Eleanor Eaton memos to Barbara Moffett, February 9 and 26, 1968, both in CRD Administration Folder 32556, “Poor People’s Campaign: General, Planning Materials - General, 1968,” and Matt Thomson memo to Barbara Moffett, February 27, 1968, in CRD Administration Folder 32557, “Poor People’s Campaign: General, Planning Materials - Regional, 1968,” all in AFSC.

with coal producers on policy, especially environmental and health regulations restricting strip mining. And then UMWA's much-heralded, innovative Welfare and Retirement Fund began to cut back benefits, sparking outrage and a new wave of activism among coal miners and their families. At the time of the War on Poverty's unveiling, the area remained one of the nation's poorest, along with some Indian reservations and inner-city neighborhoods – and, thus, a perfect locale for the federal government's new anti-poverty programs through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).⁹⁰

Combined with existing but cash-starved grassroots efforts to fight poverty and environmental degradation, new federal programs such as the Appalachian Volunteers and community action programs under OEO provided needed funding and connections to sustain and expand local activism. Initially working with the Council on Southern Mountains, a service agency in Berea, Kentucky, federal OEO officials launched the Appalachian Volunteers as a way to harness the talent and energy of local college students to promote self-help and participation by local residents in summer, holiday, and weekend projects. The first 300 volunteers repaired one- and two-room schoolhouses across eastern Kentucky during the 1963-1964 winter break. Hailed as a success by the media, officials, and residents themselves, the program's funding and personnel greatly increased over the next several years. By 1966, anti-poverty workers – including both AV's and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) – had begun to arrange community meetings around common problems not just in Kentucky, but also in West Virginia, Tennessee, Virginia, and North

⁹⁰ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 84-117; Richard P. Mulcahy, *A Social Contract for the Coal Fields: The Rise and Fall of the United Mine Workers of America Welfare and Retirement Fund* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000); and Montrie, *To Save the Land and People*, 54-59.

Carolina. At the end of that summer, the transition from more service-oriented work to community organizing seemed nearly complete as activists spearheaded a trip by 150 Appalachian residents to Washington, D.C., to discuss regional problems with federal officials. The “Appalachia Speaks” program foreshadowed residents’ participation in the Poor People’s Campaign, not only by focusing on Washington, but also because participants stayed at the Hawthorne School while in the nation’s capital. Some federal volunteers, such as Joe Mulloy, also had become involved with the Highlander School, as well as with two prominent Kentucky-based organizations, the anti-strip mining Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People (AGSLP) and the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF), the radical successor to the 1940s-era Southern Conference on Human Welfare.⁹¹

Not surprisingly, such activities did not sit well with those interested in the status quo or even the Council on Southern Mountains, which withdrew its support from the AV’s in 1966 because of council leaders’ discomfort with explicit activism. After their initial approval or at least detachment, local public and corporate officials – often the same people – sought to undermine the AV’s and their affiliated organizations. By the time Martin Luther King Jr. had articulated his new campaign for the poor in December 1967, authorities in Pike County, Kentucky, for instance, had ratcheted up the official pressure by arresting the AV’s Joe Mulloy and SCEF’s Alan and Margaret McSurely and charging them with sedition. In addition, Carl and Anne Braden, founders of SCEF in Louisville, faced similar

⁹¹ Montrie, *To Save the Land and People*, 86-96; Kiffmeyer, “From Self-Help to Sedition,” 65-94; and Joseph Mulloy, interview by James Mosby, May 26, 1970, New Orleans, MSRC. See also Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, “Citizen Soldiers: The North Carolina Fund Volunteers and the War on Poverty,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 62:4 (2000), 177-197, <http://www.law.duke.edu/journals/62LCPKorstad>, accessed June 1, 2007.

charges for attempting to bail the activists out of jail; Carl had set foot in Pike County once, Anne not at all. The case garnered attention from across the nation, sparking a long legal wrangle that ultimately prompted a Supreme Court ruling in favor of the McSurelys and considerable media attention. It was into this environment that recruiters for the Poor People's Campaign, including Tom Houck, Ernie Austin, and Andrew Young, waded that spring.⁹²

Although participants deemed the Appalachia Speaks program as a success, they were initially skeptical of returning to Washington under the auspices of the campaign. For the McSurelys, the sedition case and related contempt of Congress charges proved a major distraction for much of 1968. When he received the initial invitation to the campaign, "I threw it in the garbage," he recalled.⁹³ Although facing similar harassment, Carl Braden was accustomed to it as a longtime radical in a conservative southern state and praised the campaign for its firm link to "the struggle to end the dirty war in Vietnam."⁹⁴ But although the Bradens advertised the campaign in SCEF's newspaper, *The Southern Patriot*, Anne Braden expressed later a larger concern that blacks did not want white participation as they once did – a not-so-subtle allusion to Black Power. "Black people have their movement now," she said. "They figure they don't need white people now. They don't know whether they are

⁹² *New York Times*, March 2, 1969; Walter Goodman, "The Senate v. Alan and Margaret McSurely," *New York Times Magazine*, January 10, 1971; Al McSurely, interview by author, June 10, 2005, Chapel Hill, N.C.; Kiffmeyer, "From Self-Help to Sedition," 81-89; and *McSurely v. Ratliff*, 390 U.S. 412 (1968).

⁹³ Al McSurely, interview by author.

⁹⁴ *Southern Patriot*, March 1968.

really gonna stick with them and all this sort of thing and where we have had moves toward coalition there're all these tensions and white people finally, suddenly find that black people don't want them."⁹⁵

In Appalachia, this sentiment, however, moved in both directions. At least some apprehension existed among Appalachian whites, according to Buck Maggard, the son of a coal miner and a local activist who advocated the anti-strip mining cause among both blacks and whites. "It was the first time in my life" that he had done something like that, he recalled, adding that he learned that black and white miners had similar priorities. "They really did have an understanding of one another ... They're as good as I am."⁹⁶ Robert Fulcher, a disabled coal miner from West Virginia who began working underground at age 15, had a similar experience. In the course of working in local poverty programs, "he met many black people and came to respect them. He became consciously aware of the lies he had believed and had told others himself."⁹⁷ Officials with the American Friends Service Committee believed that despite white suspicion of a black-led SCLC campaign, the skepticism could be overcome. "Whether whites would be willing to participate in mass movement with Negroes is a touchy question though there are some Negro VISTAs involved," wrote Eleanor Eaton of the AFSC.⁹⁸ She added that blacks also participated in

⁹⁵ Anne Braden, interview by James Mosby, September 18-19, 1968, Louisville, MSRC.

⁹⁶ Buck Maggard, interview by Robert Chase, December 10, 1997, by telephone, in author's possession.

⁹⁷ *Southern Patriot*, April 1968.

⁹⁸ Eleanor Eaton memos to Barbara Moffett, February 9 and 26, 1968, both in CRD Administration Folder 32556, "Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials - General, 1968," AFSC.

protests in Williamson, West Virginia, and that more generally, crowds routinely demonstrated against regressive taxation in the state capital. As in other places, PPC organizers already had a foundation upon which to build.⁹⁹

As had been the case for a generation, the Highlander Folk School's Myles Horton and staff also put progressive activists in touch with each other – this time, SCLC organizers Houck and Ernie Austin with people like Maggard, Fulcher, and McSurely – in order to build a vibrant contingent of poor whites. All three of the latter ended up answering King's invitation to the Minority Group Conference, and were joined by at least seven others from Appalachia, including George Archard from the Poor People's Committee in Hazard, Kentucky, Josephine Combs of the Appalachian Volunteers, Phillip Young of the Council of Southern Mountains, and Clifton "Click" Johnson, a jobless coal miner from Kentucky. Also present was Peggy Terry, representing the JOIN Community Union in Chicago but who hailed from the coalfields of Alabama and Kentucky. Just as their black, Indian, and Mexican counterparts did, poor whites and their allies stressed a variety of overlapping issues addressing their impoverished state, from welfare rights and "black lung" treatment to control of their land to avoid destructive surface mining. King agreed to incorporate their demands, convincing many people that it was worthwhile to participate.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Eleanor Eaton memos to Barbara Moffett, February 9 and 26, 1968, both in CRD Administration Folder 32556, "Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials - General, 1968," AFSC; and *Washington Post*, May 1, 1968.

¹⁰⁰ Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; "American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People's Washington Campaign," SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People's Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO; and Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, April 2, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32556, "Minority Leaders Conference Washington's Poor People's Campaign," AFSC.

Others, unconvinced that non-violent strategy was still viable, required more persuasion. Several, such as Al McSurely, decided to go to Washington in King's memory after his assassination. Robert Fulcher "felt the loss personally. He believed King was killed for him." After attending King's funeral, Fulcher delivered a sermon in the Holiness style about the "sins of white people, and how he was afraid for his race and ashamed of it" – a message that resonated with some of his white counterparts.¹⁰¹ Joan Browning, a veteran civil rights activist, persuaded several recently laid-off textile workers from north Georgia to attend the march for a few days. All of these efforts helped attract 600 protesters, in late May, to hear Andrew Young and three welfare recipients pitch the campaign and a handful of tents on the West Virginia Statehouse lawn, renaming it "Do-Nothing Hill." Declared Young, "Some of our staff people said there were people down here interested in the same things we were. Well, I scratched my head and listened, but didn't believe it. And this is the tragedy of the South: that we are so long in getting together."¹⁰² Later that day, three buses from Appalachia carrying approximately 200 people – forty percent of them black – left for Washington.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ *Southern Patriot*, April 1968.

¹⁰² *Southern Patriot*, June 1968.

¹⁰³ Ernie Austin, interview by Kay Shannon; "American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People's Washington Campaign," SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People's Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO; *Southern Patriot*, April, May and June 1968; Joan Browning, March 2, 2008, by telephone, and Al McSurely, interviews by author; Buck Maggard, interview by Robert Chase; and "Appalachian People's Meeting Goes to Washington," 1968, Box 40, Folder 15, Appalachian Volunteers Papers, Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky (hereafter known as AV).

When the Appalachians first arrived at Resurrection City, other residents did not know what to make of them, but then quickly reached out. “People were just bowled over that there were poor whites in this country,” recalled Mike Clark of Highlander. “And black people and Chicanos made a point of saying they wanted to work with poor whites.”¹⁰⁴ That these whites were also dressed in shabbier clothes with shoeless children made an impact on Rudy Gonzales and Carlos Montes, while another unidentified ethnic Mexican recalled the instant connection she made with a white woman from Appalachia. “I was just talking to a lady from West Virginia and I asked her about their demands and she said, ‘WE ARE DEMANDING OUR LAND,’” the woman said, referring to strip mining. “That’s the same thing we’re demanding.”¹⁰⁵

A similar moment occurred as marchers wrote up demands to present to U.S. Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, a key campaign critic. A white widow with eight children broke down crying after telling the others that her family struggled to survive on a dwindling welfare check and part-time job when she was well enough to work. “It was one of the few times I have seen a group of whites and blacks want to protect somebody as much as they wanted to protect her,” reported Joe Mulloy, a veteran activist.¹⁰⁶ A crowd of 150 whites, ethnic Mexicans, and a few African Americans then piled into several buses and went to picket Byrd’s North Arlington, Virginia, home and present a 25-foot-long list of demands. Byrd was not home, but “[t]o everyone's surprise, the door flew open and angry-

¹⁰⁴ Mike Clark, interview by Robert Chase.

¹⁰⁵ *Southern Patriot*, June 1968, emphasis original.

¹⁰⁶ *Southern Patriot*, June 1968.

faced Mrs. Byrd appeared, crossly greeting the protestors,” wrote another observer.¹⁰⁷ She said that the senator worked “seventeen hours a day for you people” before trading shouts with the protesters, who seemed to enjoy the exchange. After cheers and chants in English and Spanish, the marchers were left “fired up,” wrote Mulloy. “They had the feeling of belonging to something larger.”¹⁰⁸

Many of those in the Byrd protest lived in the Hawthorne School, but unlike the ethnic Mexican contingent, poor whites also had a sizable “hollow” in Resurrection City – one in which they took pride. Mike Clark, a staff member with Highlander, eventually lived in both places and contended in discussions with the earliest chroniclers of the campaign that it was in these sites, not the daily demonstrations or Solidarity Day, where the most productive interactions and relationship-building occurred. “[V]iewed as a massive educational experiment, a great deal came out of Resurrection City,” Clark told Charles Fager in late 1968. “Poor people from all over the country came together to live and they learned they had common problems.”¹⁰⁹ That learning, Clark admitted, came in many different forms, some of which were simply “chaotic,” a word he often used to describe the city.¹¹⁰

One form was a contribution in which the Highlander staff took a deep sense of pride: the cultural tent called the Many Races Soul Center. Through this space, Highlander

¹⁰⁷ *Washington Post*, June 2, 1968.

¹⁰⁸ Quote in *Southern Patriot*, June 1968. See also L. Wilson Avena, “Participants Observer,” June 1, 1968, AGP.

¹⁰⁹ Mike Clark letter to Chuck Fager, December 13, 1968, Box 105, Folder 12, Pt. 2, HREC.

¹¹⁰ Mike Clark, interview by Robert Chase.

took a lead in fostering intercultural exchange among the campaign's diverse participants, particularly through music and dance. Highlander workshops long had featured music, from old labor songs to updated Negro spirituals, and it had been Highlander activists Guy and Candie Carawan who introduced "We Shall Overcome" to the movement. Therefore, Myles Horton originally had conceived the Highlander program as a weekend workshop led by the Carawans, but then accepted an offer to merge it with that of SCLC and the Smithsonian Institute facilitated by New Yorkers Anne Romasco, Jimmy Collier, and Frederick Kirkpatrick. The result was the vibrant heart of the so-called white section of Resurrection City and a destination for people of all ethnicities. "When the rain started, a shelter was built above the fire where coffee was always boiling and around which good conversation or singing was always taking place," wrote Horton. "The scheduled sessions soon gave way to an 18-hour round of informal discussions, arguments, music, singing, coffee drinking and eating."¹¹¹ Through the end of June, before police flattened the Soul Center along with Resurrection City, visiting entertainers found their way there for informal sing-a-longs. From movement icons Bernice Reagon and Pete Seeger singing freedom songs and folk tunes, to Miguel Barragán and George Crow Flies High performing traditional Mexican ballads and Indian chants, the Soul Center witnessed a daily symphony of sorts. Reagon, who helped found the SNCC Freedom Singers after having her talent discovered during the Albany, Georgia, movement, recalled an evening at the Soul Center as one of her earliest moments of interethnic cultural exchange:

¹¹¹ Myles Horton, "Poor People's Cultural Workshop," June 29, 1968, Box 109, Folder 10, Pt. 2, HREC.

[F]or me it was a very interesting exercise not in simply putting people together but in one of my earlier watchings of a cultural program where I saw musicians relating and shifting their material because they were acknowledging the relationship between who they were and who somebody else was.¹¹²

Such exchanges also occurred at the Hawthorne School and continued there after Resurrection City's demise.¹¹³

Other efforts at intercultural programming proved less compelling to many of the marchers, however, especially attempts run directly by SCLC staff. The Poor People's University (PPU), for instance, offered twenty-five lectures across the city, including thirteen at George Washington University. Speakers included radical journalist I.F. Stone, pacifist and future Chicago Seven member David Dellinger, writer Michael Harrington, and many others, and classes ranged from the NWRO-sponsored Ethics of a Guaranteed Annual Income to Mexican history and culture taught by Corky Gonzales. Some kept people's attention, such as Gonzales' discussion of Chicanos' Indian heritage. But much of the programming struck observers as boring, unproductive, and too dominated by middle class whites. Thus, discussion leaders found their audiences constantly shifting, sometimes exacerbated by people leaving for demonstrations called by other SCLC officials. Hostility among the students was also palpable. For instance, Harrington felt demoralized after his lecture because a black man, "I think with emotional problems, decided that I was the incarnation of white racism. . . . I became concerned that he could physically attack me. The

¹¹² Chase, "Class Resurrection," 23.

¹¹³ Mike Clark, interview by Robert Chase; Myles Horton letters to Bernard Lafayette, May 1, 1968, and Haskell Wexler, May 2, 1968, and Horton, "Poor People's Cultural Workshop," June 29, 1968, all in Box 109, Folder 10, Pt 2, HREC; and Chase, "Class Resurrection," 22-23.

meeting sort of came to a very unhappy ending, where my message didn't get across."¹¹⁴ Education certainly occurred, but not always in the way SCLC organizers had originally conceived it. Residents appeared to learn less in the classes and lectures of the PPU than just standing in line and playing checkers with each other. As Charles Cheng, a Washington, D.C., teachers' union official said: "The whole Resurrection City experience was a Freedom School."¹¹⁵

As with other groups, members of the Appalachian contingent came and went – some because marchers had to return to work, others from exhaustion or even disgust. Buck Maggard, for instance, lived just a few nights in Resurrection City. Calling himself "a family man," Maggard said that, "Most of the work I did was leading up to" the campaign, in the realm of recruitment.¹¹⁶ Joan Browning, another recruiter, also stayed in Washington briefly – although that was enough time for her to learn "that brown people had the same problems" as blacks and whites.¹¹⁷ But in contrast to press reports' claims, FBI observers stated that people from Appalachia kept arriving in Resurrection City to fill the shoes of those who left. Eric Metzner, an organizer from Pineville, West Virginia, helped coordinate two short bus trips that supplied fresh faces to Washington. The first visit went well, culminating in the protest outside Senator Byrd's home and a pleasant, eye-opening stay at

¹¹⁴ Harrington, in *Voices of Freedom*, ed. Hampton and Fayer, 478.

¹¹⁵ Quote by Charles Cheng, interview by Malika Lumumba, June 6, 1970, Washington, D.C., MSRC. Newsletters for PPU, Box 159-10, Folder 30, MSRCVF; L. Wilson Avena, "PPC – Participants Observer," June 6-7, 1968, AGP; Mike Clark, interview by Robert Chase; Stoney Cooks and Ernie Austin, interviews by Kay Shannon.

¹¹⁶ Buck Maggard, interview by Robert Chase.

¹¹⁷ Joan Browning, interview by author.

Hawthorne. The second journey, however, was another matter. Disorganized and underfunded from the beginning, this trip in mid-June initially delivered marchers for Solidarity Day to a soggy and demoralized Resurrection City. Refusing to stay there, Metzner and others negotiated with the administrators of the Hawthorne School to allow their approximately 500-person contingent to reside in the cramped but welcoming facility. The accommodations worked for some who “had a ball talking with other people at Hawthorne,” wrote Metzner, but others became extremely frustrated with SCLC being “completely out of touch with itself, much less other groups.” Long delays in paying expenses prompted a group of disabled miners to drop out before leaving West Virginia, while SCLC cut off Hawthorne’s food for three days. The Appalachians left Washington early more divided and disappointed than when they came – something they blamed on SCLC and themselves.¹¹⁸

The most prominent Appalachians, including Clark, Horton, and the JOIN staff, stayed for the duration. Although she had not lived in Appalachia for more than a decade, Peggy Terry of JOIN emerged as the closest poor white marchers had to a spokesperson, taking the stage at Solidarity Day to list their demands. There, she laid out a variety of goals. Some of them, such as the abolition of “right-to-work” laws, a “people’s tax” on coal and other natural resources, and a guaranteed annual income, were economic in nature. But many of their demands also echoed less classically economy-oriented issues championed by other ethnic groups such as lowering the voting age to eighteen and demanding that the

¹¹⁸ Eric L. Metzner, “Partial Report on the Trip to Washington,” June 3, 1968, and “Report on Second Trip to Washington,” June 28, 1968, both in Box 40, Folder 15, AV; and Pittsburgh SAC memos to FBI Director, June 11 and 17, 1968.

Justice Department grant full recognition of poor whites' human and legal rights.¹¹⁹ “[I]n memory of the Rev. Martin Luther King,” Terry declared, “we hereby serve notice that poor whites are beginning to understand that black and white in this country are pitted against each other for no other reason than that it is profitable for the rich white folks to do so.”¹²⁰

Authorities took only gradual steps, if any, to address Terry’s policy demands. Yet for many of the poor whites and their allies, their time spent in Washington had been educational. Much like their Indian and ethnic Mexican counterparts, they left Washington understanding that the answers were not necessarily in the nation’s capital. Joan Browning left believing that Washington, D.C. “is just like the Alabama state capital, just in a different location.”¹²¹ Despite wondering if the campaign had been “a mistake” because of “a lot of shortcomings,” SCEF director Carl Braden concluded that:

[F]or the white Appalachians who went up there it was a real tremendous experience. Some of our organizers went with them. And it was an eye-opening experience. For one thing, as one of our guys said, it undermined their racism. Because they developed a whole new view of black people. Now here were black people they saw who were very strong and organizing and getting something done. See, that's the way it looks.¹²²

Poor people had a chance to meet others that might not have looked like themselves, but had much in common, observed Anne Braden. She added that, “People who are really with [the poor] ... got a feeling of what would happen if the poor people got together in this

¹¹⁹ The only other substantive scholarly discussion of the poor white contingent, by Robert Chase, presents their goals as solely class-driven. This rings true only if one uses class in the broadest sense of the term, and not strictly framed economically. “Class Resurrection,” 18-19.

¹²⁰ *Southern Patriot*, September 1968.

¹²¹ Joan Browning, interview by author.

¹²² Carl Braden, interview by Robert Mosby, September 18-19, 1968, Louisville, Ky., MSRC.

country.”¹²³ Indeed, for veteran organizers like Myles Horton, the entire experience of Resurrection City and the Many Races Soul Center opened windows to activists from other regions and cultures. Although never reaching the height of Highlander’s influence on the labor and civil rights organizing of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the relationships begun in Washington with ethnic Mexicans in the West proved fruitful for years to come. “We had a long relationship with those people ... long after the Poor People’s Campaign,” recalled Buck Maggard. “Those people came down to Highlander for years and years.”¹²⁴

* * *

Both scholarship and the public memory largely have forgotten the PPC experiences of ethnic Mexicans, American Indians, and poor whites. Yet these groups’ marginalization pales in comparison to that of the small number of Puerto Ricans that heard Martin Luther King Jr.’s call to Washington. This marginalization was in part the result of the contingent’s small size. Although thousands gathered for several one-day rallies in both New York City and Washington, as few as twenty-five Puerto Ricans stayed in the nation’s capital for any length of time. But their diminutive stature during the campaign also reflected Puerto Ricans’ unusual outsider status in the United States. They fell outside of the black-white binary that dominated U.S. constructions of race, yet unlike any other Spanish-speaking group in the nation, Puerto Ricans were automatically citizens. Often dark-skinned and Spanish-speaking, citizens but also champions of their homeland’s independence, Puerto Ricans blended the interests and demands of their black, ethnic Mexican, and Indian

¹²³ Anne Braden, interview by Robert Mosby, September 18-19, 1968, Louisville, Ky., MSRC.

¹²⁴ Buck Maggard, interview by Robert Chase.

counterparts. And as a result, black, Chicano and even Indian articulation and interpretation of common issues usually trumped that of Puerto Ricans among the public. Whether it was police brutality or welfare rights, bilingual education or independence for the commonwealth, Puerto Ricans rarely had the opportunity to “own” the issue in U.S. society or politics. This phenomenon became that much more acute during the Poor People’s Campaign.¹²⁵

In early 1968, campaign organizers, however, had made an effort to tap into the activism of the nation’s largest Puerto Rican communities, in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Particularly in New York, where roughly two-thirds of the nation’s Puerto Ricans lived in the mid-1960s, a rich assortment of activist organizations had developed. Some, such as the Puerto Rican Forum, which formed in 1957, patterned itself after the NAACP and sought to become the community’s powerbroker with city authorities. Others, like ASPIRA and the Puerto Rican Family Institute, built upon the War on Poverty’s community action programs and offered a variety of services to the community. Organizations like the Puerto Rican Day Parade celebrated a unique culture. Still others embraced direct action. For example, El Congreso del Pueblo (Council of Hometown Clubs), founded in 1956 and more working class in nature, blended basic services such as shelter, jobs, and emergency

¹²⁵ Gollin, *Demography of Protest*, 16. For more on Puerto Ricans’ awkward fit in the black-white binary, or “dance” between African Americans and whites, as one scholar calls it, see José Ramón Sánchez, *Boricua Power: A Political History of Puerto Ricans in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 171-176, 231-234; Linda C. Delgado, “Jesus Colon and the Making of a New York City Community, 1917-1974” and Carmen Teresa Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship and Community Building in the Puerto Rican Diaspora: A Conclusion,” both in *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*, ed. Whalen, 80-83, 228-231; and Jorge Duany, “Neither White Nor Black: The Representation of Racial Identity Among Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the U.S. Mainland,” in *Neither Enemies Nor Friends*, ed. Dzidzienyo and Oboler, 173-188.

financial help with more assertive advocacy including mass street demonstrations against police brutality and discrimination. Even more radical organizations, most notably the New York Young Lords Party, emerged in 1969 and modeled itself after Chicago's Young Lords Political Organization and the Black Panther Party. It was these organizations and their smaller counterparts in Chicago and Philadelphia from which PPC organizers hoped to recruit.¹²⁶

Although finding Puerto Rican activists was not a problem, locating ones who were willing to join a civil rights organization-sponsored campaign proved a far larger challenge. Despite a shared history of oppression and poverty in New York, Puerto Ricans there expressed reservations about their black counterparts, and vice versa. By early 1968, some observers believed black-Puerto Rican relations had reached the boiling point. "One of the most distressing and appalling things happening in our city today is the widening cleavage between Afro-Americans and Puerto Ricans, two ethnic groups that should, if anything, be clinging to each other as they fight up from the bottom of the pack," wrote the *New York Amsterdam News*, the city's primary black newspaper.¹²⁷ At the core of the conflict lay a competition over limited resources, particularly in the federal War on Poverty, urban renewal, and Model Cities programs, as well as local school boards. Remarked long-time Puerto Rican activist Gilberto Gerena-Valentín, founder of El Congreso del Pueblo: "We are

¹²⁶ Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, 226-234; Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*, 78-79; Johanna Fernández, "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics," in *Freedom North*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 255-286; and 1960 U.S. Census, "Puerto Ricans in the United States," PC (2) 1D, Table 15, 103.

¹²⁷ *New York Amsterdam News*, March 16, 1968.

at each other's throats fighting for the crumbs of anti-poverty funds."¹²⁸ Yet, Gerena-Valentín's comment was more than an acknowledgement of black-Puerto Rican conflict, but also suggested that a white elite-dominated power structure exacerbated or even encouraged such discord by squeezing anti-poverty funding and pitting minorities against each other. During his long public career as a labor organizer, community activist, city human rights commissioner, and later a politician, Gerena-Valentín also had witnessed moments when New York's minority communities overcame their differences. For instance, in February 1964, Gerena-Valentín and the National Association for Puerto Rican Civil Rights assisted black leaders in staging several citywide school boycotts, using them as platforms to call for improved education for both blacks and Puerto Ricans. Thus, when Poor People's Campaign organizers came calling, Gerena-Valentín saw the potential both to work with Martin Luther King Jr. and his organization and to publicize the unique needs of the nation's largest concentration of Puerto Ricans.¹²⁹

Those who participated seemed willing to embrace the promise of coalition. Gerena-Valentín and five other Puerto Rican activists from New York – Grace Mora Newman, José Ortiz, Mario Abreo, Rosina Reilova, and Ted Velez – attended the Minority Group Conference in early March. Although the records reveal few details of their participation that day, Gerena-Valentín and Newman joined the campaign's Committee of 100 and its steering panel. In March and April, New York became a key space for

¹²⁸ *New York Times*, April 23, 1968.

¹²⁹ *New York Times*, February 6 and March 2, 1964, May 10, 1967, and January 23, 26, February 25, and April 18, 1968, and July 10, 18, 1969; and Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*, 84-85.

recruitment as Newman, affiliated with the Fort Hood Three Defense Committee, and Gerena-Valentín spearheaded the distribution of 100,000 leaflets in predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhoods.¹³⁰ Throughout the campaign, Puerto Ricans stressed a variety of issues, most of which they portrayed as broadly as possible, from the paternalism and “outsider” quality embedded in many War on Poverty programs to poor minorities’ lack of job opportunities. Declared one activist to Attorney General Ramsey Clark: “We hold the Justice Department responsible for the lily-white leadership of trade unions that is allowed to exclude blacks and Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans from the construction industry.”¹³¹ Clearly, Clark’s say over the construction industry was limited at best, but such language proved a heartening attempt to link Puerto Rican interests with that of blacks and ethnic Mexicans. Activists repeated such demands at the Puerto Rican contribution to Solidarity Day, held four days before the June 19 rally. In a position paper released that day, Puerto Rican organizers framed their goals in the broadest sense. “Change in American’s (sic) approach to poverty can only be accomplished from a position of strength,” it stated. “That strength can only spring from an organized coalition of poor people that cuts across ethnic, racial and geographical lines.” And in an allusion to enduring paternalism, Puerto

¹³⁰ The Fort Hood Three Defense Committee formed to enlist support for soldiers James Johnson, David Samas, and Dennis Mora, Grace’s brother, who were detained after refusing orders to go to Vietnam in 1966. The Fort Hood Three became a cause célèbre within the peace movement and were even the focus of a Pete Seeger song, “Ballad of the Fort Hood Three.” Dennis Mora, James Johnson, and David Samas, “The Fort Hood Three,” in *We Won’t Go: Personal Accounts of War Objectors*, ed. Alice Lynd (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 181-202; *New York Times*, September 7, 1966; and “Ballad of the Fort Hood Three,” 1966, www.peteseeger.net/balladforthood.htm, accessed February 2, 2008.

¹³¹ *Washington Post*, April 30, 1968.

Ricans added that, “... The poor must be recognized as *part* of this nation and not just a *concern* of this nation” (emphasis added).¹³²

The fact that the participating Puerto Ricans held their own rally of 4,000 strong on *another* day, however, underscores both their independence from and marginalization by SCLC organizers. Gerena-Valentín explained that the rally, unlike Solidarity Day, was held on the weekend to accommodate those with jobs and to maximize turnout. Yet despite this practical argument, the symbolism of Puerto Ricans holding their own rally separate from Solidarity Day – originally chosen to coincide with Juneteenth – spoke volumes. The rally featured speeches, songs, and banners in Spanish, many participants wore sombreros, and the issues of the day had a strong *barrio* flavor. In addition to the language of solidarity, the position paper laid out far more specific demands rooted in the Puerto Rican experience in New York and other urban settings, including: adequate housing; “urban renewal, not removal”; “decentralized public services based on local ethnic and language conditions”; bilingual education; credit unions and consumer unions; recognition of Spanish in voter literacy tests; and many others. Another impressive rally held in May in New York’s Central Park featured similar demands, highlighting bilingual services and health care designed specifically for Puerto Ricans. Organizers at the time also suggested that Puerto Ricans staying in Washington would build their own shantytown adjacent to Resurrection City. Not

¹³² Quote in “Position Paper: Puerto Ricans March to Washington,” June 15, 1968, Box 32, Folder 1, RLT. Also “American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People’s Washington Campaign,” March 15, 1968, and Lares Tresjan and Sandra Green, minutes of steering committee meeting, n.d. [late March 1968?], both in Box 2101, NWRO; “Committee of 100,” n.d., Box 31, Folder 22, RLT; *Washington Post*, April 30 and May 1, 1968; and Eleanor Easton memos to Barbara Moffett, April 2 and 23, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32556, AFSC.

enough Puerto Ricans ended up going to have their own subdivision, but the sentiment underlined their fierce independence. Puerto Ricans had their own distinctive needs – ones that were neither black nor Mexican. And as the campaign waned and those remaining in Washington formed the Poor People’s Embassy (PPE), other minorities paid their respect by naming Anibol Solivan as the Puerto Rican representative to the group’s executive council of five – despite the contingent’s small numbers. Solivan and Gerena-Valentín remained key boosters throughout the PPE’s existence.¹³³

What exactly was the campaign’s legacy for Puerto Ricans? Scholar Andrés Torres suggests that the one-day rally at the Washington Monument was “perhaps the most significant prelude to the ‘New Awakening’ ” of Puerto Rican radicalism in the late 1960s.¹³⁴ Organizing among Puerto Ricans had been taking place since at least the 1950s in New York and elsewhere. But unlike this activism, the campaign represented one last challenge to Congress and the public to address poverty in a substantive way. Similar to the experience of American Indians, many Puerto Ricans in 1968 concluded that the federal government disregarded their core concerns and that, to make a real difference, they had to use more innovative, attention-getting tactics in their own communities – such as the Garbage Offensive by New York’s Young Lords Organization in 1969. Even Solivan and Gerena-

¹³³ *Washington Post*, June 16, 1968; “Position Paper: Puerto Ricans March to Washington,” June 15, 1968, Box 32, Folder 1, RLT; *Worker*, May 28, 1968; and *New York Times*, May 27, 1968.

¹³⁴ Torres, “Political Radicalism in the Diaspora: The Puerto Rican Experience,” in *Puerto Rican Movement*, eds. Torres and Velázquez, 5.

Valentín moved the Poor People’s Embassy to New York City, where they believed they could be more effective in interethnic lobbying.¹³⁵

In addition to embracing more innovative tactics, Puerto Ricans also used the campaign to build ties with other activists, especially in the Chicano movement. One Chicago newspaper argued at the time that the campaign “was the first time that Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans had come together to show support for each other.”¹³⁶ Linking Spanish-speaking people from the East with those from the West and Southwest, the campaign facilitated later cooperation between the small permanent Puerto Rican contingent and the Alianza, Crusade for Justice, and Brown Berets. Nita Jo Gonzales, Corky’s eldest daughter, married a Puerto Rican she met at the campaign and lived for a time in New York when the Poor People’s Embassy moved its headquarters there. More importantly, several dozen Puerto Ricans – including contemporary and future members of the Young Lords – traveled from Chicago and New York to the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver in early 1969, all based upon relationships built in Washington. Young Lords chairman José “Cha Cha” Jiménez of Chicago considered Chicano activists like Corky Gonzales key allies and openly supported movement activists in their quest for a viable La Raza Unida party. Jiménez also encouraged these relationships at home, where the

¹³⁵ Nita Jo Gonzales, interview by author.

¹³⁶ *LADO*, August 1968.

substantial ethnic Mexican and Puerto Rican communities took their first tentative steps toward a combined Latino identity.¹³⁷

Long-term interethnic solidarity, however, should not be overstated. Despite employing the language of unity, Puerto Ricans doggedly pursued their own interests – ones that overlapped but did not completely coincide with African American or ethnic Mexican priorities. To Ralph Abernathy, Puerto Ricans harbored a “secret agenda . . . [that] helped to blur the focus of what we had come to Washington to accomplish.” He seemed particularly puzzled by the issue of Puerto Rican independence and why it animated mainland Puerto Ricans since “the majority of the people on the island didn't hold to that view. Nevertheless, in the Puerto Rican section of Resurrection City, that's all they talked about.”¹³⁸ While the issue did not dominate Puerto Rican discourse during the PPC, it did represent a dramatic distinction from the priorities of SCLC and most African Americans in the campaign. And it became an obstacle when SCLC officials were ambivalent to understanding the issue and how it related to Puerto Rican migrants' poverty.¹³⁹

The issue of the commonwealth's independence in a way symbolized the challenge that Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and poor whites (not to mention ethnic Mexicans) faced when they went to Washington in the spring of 1968. Encouraged by the potential of

¹³⁷ LADO, August 1968; Nita Jo Gonzales and Maria Varela, interviews by author; Cha Cha Jiménez and Corky Gonzales, interview by journalist Karen Wald, October 1970, accessed at <http://www.walterlippmann.com/klw-1970.html>; Iris Morales, “¡Palante, Siempre Palante! The Young Lords,” in *The Puerto Rican Movement*, eds. Torres and Velázquez, 211-212; Jeffries, “From Gang-bangers to Urban Revolutionaries,” 288-304; and Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness*.

¹³⁸ Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 520.

¹³⁹ For more on the independence movement, see Torres and Velázquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement*, Chapters 2, 3, 6.

interethnic collaboration, they accepted Martin Luther King Jr.'s invitation to participate in the campaign, despite lingering worries that their distinctive constructions of poverty may not be accepted or understood by SCLC organizers. But even when some marchers' largest fears became a reality, the Washington experience still proved worthwhile and instructive. Marchers discovered common ground in unexpected places, and when there were differences, the experience strengthened intra-ethnic resolve. Participants even left Washington with lessons on what kind of organizing worked and did not work. Thus, rather than represent the stark end of an era or style of organizing, the campaign became a bridge to a more militant activism that became apparent in the years to come.

Chapter Five

‘Framing’ the Movement: Mass Media, Class and the Campaign

“Poor people goodbye: the press did you in.”

- Robert Terrell, *New York Post* reporter writing in *Commonweal*¹

While organizers of the Poor People’s Campaign may have struggled to understand the histories and interests of their non-black counterparts, officials in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference did recognize the interests of the mainstream media. SCLC had established its reputation through an often systematic and sophisticated manipulation and cultivation of the press, much of it based upon the charm and charisma of Martin Luther King Jr. In the last few years of his life, as he turned more attention to the Vietnam War and economic inequality, King and his aides had an increasingly fragile relationship with the media – one that continued to worsen after King’s death. The fraying of this relationship came to a head during an afternoon press briefing in Resurrection City in June 1968. Frustrated with what he saw as the media’s negative characterizations of the campaign, Hosea Williams lashed out at members of the press, accusing them of participating in a “conspiracy to poison the mind of America” by exaggerating the PPC’s shortcomings and ignoring its accomplishments. “Most look only at what’s bad,” said Williams, “city manager” of the tent city. “They sneak around like an underground assassin, looking for dirt and

¹ *Commonweal*, July 12, 1968.

filth.”² When the Washington campaign neared collapse later in the month, Ralph Abernathy alluded to the same issues, albeit in less colorful language. “If people could pay as much attention to the demands of the poor as what was going on in Resurrection City,” Abernathy lamented, “the campaign could get somewhere.”³

When King and his aides first conceived of placing a shantytown on the Washington Mall, they foresaw Resurrection City playing a far different role than the national daily press eventually portrayed. SCLC organizers imagined the city as not only a symbol of unity and resolve among the nation’s poor, but also a pragmatic launching point for any number of protests, marches, and if need be, massive civil disobedience. It would be an encampment that would remain until the American public and Congress either heard and acted upon the poor’s pleas for respect and assistance, or risk a more disruptive campaign at the national party conventions later that summer. But by the time crews demolished the tent city in late June, national daily press reports depicted Resurrection City as a disorganized, filthy, and violent mud pit. Rather than garner sympathy for the plight of the nation’s poor, the shantytown became a deterrent to such feeling, as well as a burden to those SCLC officials trying to operate it. Although there was more to the campaign than just the shantytown, Resurrection City came to symbolize the PPC itself. Consequently, when police knocked

² *Washington Post*, June 9, 1968.

³ Berry, “The anger and problems and sickness.”

down Resurrection City, most contemporary observers viewed the campaign as effectively finished.⁴

In the days and weeks afterward, most members of the national press, who had made the campaign a resident of page one for nearly two months, deemed the PPC a complete failure and placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Ralph Abernathy and other SCLC organizers. “This failure was due at least as much to SCLC’s own mistakes as it was to any Machiavellian machinations of the Administration and the mass media,” wrote independent journalist Charles Fager. “The movement left Congress unmoved and possibly even more hostile to the poor. ... (It) alienated a substantial portion of its previous constituency, black and white, very likely set back the prospects for a viable multi-ethnic coalition, and weakened by default the credibility of non-violent change.”⁵ In the decades since, scholars have perpetuated many of Fager’s conclusions, including the ultimate unambiguous failure of the campaign and the leadership’s critical role in that result.⁶ Clearly, Ralph Abernathy and other top SCLC officials – admittedly devastated by the violent death of their friend and spiritual guide – shared some of the blame for the PPC’s ignominious end, as has been demonstrated in earlier chapters. Yet such an interpretation ignores the campaign’s myriad complexities –

⁴ Contemporary press reports treated the shantytown’s demolition as the campaign’s end, even though its first phase continued through July. The SCLC launched a second phase of the campaign in early 1969, which included marches against hunger in Mississippi and Illinois, as well as support for a hospital workers strike in Charleston, S.C. See Chapter Six.

⁵ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 141-142.

⁶ McKnight, *The Last Crusade*; Chase, “Class Resurrection”; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 357-384; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*; 589-601, 605-609, 611-618.

from its legacy of small but important personal interactions to its larger impact on the Chicano movement and other non-black activism.

At the heart of this simplistic, top-down interpretation of leadership failure lays the influential role of the mainstream press and its powerful ability to “frame” the world around it, including the freedom struggle. As Todd Gitlin demonstrates in his analysis of press coverage of the New Left, the public saw “media frames” of the era’s social movements, not a “mirror of reality.”⁷ In other words, a mostly white, middle class press corps constantly placed the social movements of the time in easily digestible predetermined bits for the public, emphasizing the threat of violence and conflict, formal male leadership, and organization and style over substance. As recent scholarship on media and the black freedom struggle has demonstrated, such framing could be beneficial. In their Pulitzer Prize-winning study, former reporters Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff portray journalists as playing an active role in publicizing the ugliness of the South’s racial caste system.⁸ From

⁷ Gitlin, a journalism scholar and former member of the Students for a Democratic Society, provides a comprehensive definition of media frames, a concept mostly used by social scientists and psychologists. Media frames are “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters. . . . Media frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organized the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports. . . . Frames enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely: to recognize it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories, and to package it for efficient relay to their audiences.” *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980; 2003), 6-7. See also Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 10-11.

⁸ Most studies focusing on the national media place it in a positive light. See Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); and Julian Bond, “The Media and the Movement: Looking Back from the Southern Front,” 16-40, and Jenny Walker, “A Media-Made Movement? Black Violence and Nonviolence in the Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” 41-66, both in *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida,

the Emmett Till lynching in 1955 to Bloody Sunday on Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge ten years later, mostly white middle class journalists aided civil rights activists in the fight to turn public opinion – particularly in the North – against Jim Crow by highlighting white violence against mostly black nonviolent protesters. Some of this assistance, historians add, even came in the form of journalists' own physical and financial sacrifices. Perhaps most importantly, a new sympathetic generation of mostly southern-born journalists allowed African Americans from Mamie Bradley to Martin Luther King Jr. to build public sympathy in the North toward the plight of southern blacks.⁹

Yet while the movement's narrow framing through the threat of conflict and bloodshed, both real and imagined, certainly played a role, as Charles Payne states, "the focus on violence bore its own costs by discouraging the development of a more complex understanding of the movement and its evolution."¹⁰ Lost were the nuts and bolts of organizing, including the painstaking development of relationships, the centrality of women, and the daily sacrifices made by civil rights workers and their allies. Scholars' virtual

2001). A few scholars offer a more critical analysis. Edward P. Morgan, "Media Culture and the Public Memory of the Black Panther Party," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Lentz, *Symbols, the Newsmagazines, and Martin Luther King*; and Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Ch. 14. For candid insights from a sympathetic journalist's perspective, see Paul Good, *The Trouble I've Seen: White Journalist / Black Movement* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1975).

⁹ See also David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978), 161-178; Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 49-202; and Ruth Feldstein, "'I Wanted the Whole World to See': Race, Gender and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne J. Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 263-303. Although not Feldstein's explicit argument, Mamie Bradley, Emmett Till's mother, relied heavily on national press coverage to generate widespread sympathy for her and her son.

¹⁰ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 395.

lionization of members of the media ends up reifying the master narrative, including its narrow periodization from 1955 to 1965, the strictly southern and black-white nature of the freedom struggle, and an overemphasis on conflict and internal dissent. Roberts and Klibanoff, for instance, praise journalists such as Claude Sitton, a connoisseur of conflict-driven coverage, and marginalize the years after 1965 as simply “Beyond,” depicting the period as little more than urban riots, unraveling coalitions, and physical attacks on veteran reporters.¹¹ While activists fighting Northern racism increased their national profile in the mid- to late 1960s, urban uprisings and the threat of violence came to dominate civil rights coverage. For the Black Panther Party, for instance, the media obsessed over guns, fiery rhetoric, and “Panther slogans about revolution or killing ‘pigs.’” What was an ideologically complicated organization often rooted in communities and dedicated to grassroots programming was “reduced to a single, dominant essence – they are about violence and criminality, period.”¹²

¹¹ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 395-407. The authors go to great lengths in praising these mostly white reporters and editors, especially Claude Sitton, the southern bureau chief for the *New York Times*. When Sitton became the *Times* national editor in 1964, he insisted that the paper always cover Martin Luther King Jr.’s appearances. “His very presence could inspire blacks to demonstrate and white racists to lash out,” they write. “Sitton was convinced, too, that no man in America was at greater personal risk than King; he might be assassinated at any moment; and that, Sitton believed, could touch off a cataclysmic reaction.” *The Race Beat*, 378. Despite the risk of overemphasizing the role of bloodshed in the movement, Jenny Walker offers a fresh perspective in arguing that black violence has always been a part of the struggle, but that the media simply downplayed it until the emergence of Black Power. “A Media-Made Movement?” in *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Ward, 41-66. This acknowledges other trends in the historiography that recognize the southern tradition of black armed self-defense and how it worked in tandem with non-violent strategy. See Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*.

¹² Quotes in Morgan, “Media Culture and the Public Memory of the Black Panther Party,” in ed. Lazerow and Williams, 331. Morgan’s analysis of the newsweeklies’ Panther coverage suggests that the press briefly depicted the Panthers as unwarranted victims of police violence after the assassination of Fred Hampton in December 1969 and during the high-profile trials of 1970 and

Thus, the Poor People's Campaign offers an excellent case study of media framing in this later period. This chapter argues that the national press – even black-owned newspapers – played a central role in presenting the PPC in such a way that it obscured many of the campaign's intentions, minimized its impact, and ultimately turned the American public against it.¹³ Although not necessarily deliberate, this process took many forms, including the most obvious tendency to prioritize stories of conflict, violence, and misdeeds over those of human interest – especially in Resurrection City. Less obvious, but perhaps more critical, was the media's subtle use of language and images to frame the PPC as yet another chapter of the black freedom struggle, dominated by African Americans and their priorities. From King's initial speech in 1967 to the final days of the campaign's Washington phase and

1971. Such coverage, however, sparked a backlash against the so-called liberal media and “radical chic” elites, leading to a return of more negative portrayals in the mid-1970s and since.

¹³ Because there is always another publication to study, I have limited my examination of the national press to a handful of respected representatives with some reach beyond their home markets: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. Clearly, national television broadcasts also helped shape public perceptions of the campaign, but unfortunately, broadcasts during the campaign are generally not available for research. The Television News Archive at Vanderbilt University starts at August 4, 1968, and the networks routinely deny research requests, including to this researcher. Although the widest-circulation newspapers and magazines remain the focus, I also examine the most influential black, Chicano, and alternative publications for the sake of comparison, including the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, *La Raza*, *El Gallo*, *Chicano Student*, *People's World*, *The Worker*, *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, *Business Week*, *Commentary*, *Commonweal*, *The New Yorker*, and the New Left's Liberation News Service. In the late 1960s, the *Defender* and *Courier* were considered national newspapers, with weekly national editions read by African Americans across the country. The Chicago paper also had a daily local edition, the *Daily Defender*, which I periodically cite. It also should be noted that both editorial and news reports will be examined together. Although editorial desks and city/national desks are separate, supposedly reflecting the difference between “opinion” and “news,” they generally reflect different degrees of the same biases. Also, even before today's world of an increasingly consolidated media, many of these organizations shared articles. In addition to Associated Press and United Press International copy, the *Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* ran each other's stories on occasion, while the *Constitution* ran abbreviated *New York Times* pieces. Several black newspapers had similar arrangements.

beyond, both white and black press coverage obscured the PPC's multiethnic character and class-based goals.

The result was critical to not only the public's perception of what the campaign was about, but also to both its eventual "failure" and implications for the movement in the years after 1968. First and foremost, such framing reinforced the racialization of the campaign's "poor" as "black" – not ethnic Mexican, American Indian, or white – and thus undermines claims since that the public explicitly rejected a class-based movement.¹⁴ Robert Chase, for instance, argues that the campaign's rejection stemmed from its class ideals; I suggest that its class objectives were never made clear enough for the public to reject the campaign on such grounds.¹⁵ Secondly, the media's marginalization of non-black participants obscured several smaller successes within the campaign, particularly by ethnic Mexicans, which calls into question the appropriateness of even using a success-versus-failure framework. Lastly, journalists' framing shaped activist strategies, even sparking counter-productive responses at times, such as Hosea Williams' June 1968 outburst. Thus, a deeper analysis of how the media depicted the Poor People's Campaign contributes to a relatively underdeveloped part of movement scholarship – the media's role in shaping the actions and outcomes of the freedom struggle after 1965 – and, as a result, challenges the well-entrenched master narrative of the movement by replacing a moralistic, black and white history with one dominated by contingencies and shades of gray.

¹⁴ See Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 102-132.

¹⁵ Chase, "Class Resurrection."

* * *

Beginning in the 1950s, the national press played a significant and often sympathetic role in the burgeoning freedom struggle. Reacting to black activism and building on the cautious advocacy of a handful of moderate white southern editors, several young journalists successfully carved out civil rights beats – particularly after “big events” such as the first *Brown* decision in 1954 and the Emmett Till lynching a year later.¹⁶ Civil rights organizations, including SCLC, recognized the potential advantages of this new attention. As many scholars persuasively argue, Martin Luther King Jr. was in part made by the media – the right man at the right time, comfortable in front of the cameras and articulate enough to reach sympathetic white liberals through the printed press.¹⁷ When the national media finally began to cover the Montgomery bus boycott months after it started, King became the face of the movement. By the 1960s, SCLC viewed the media as an essential tool to “redeem the soul of America,” using this strategy to great effect in Birmingham and Selma. By orchestrating a stark contrast between mostly black, non-violent protesters singing freedom songs and white law enforcement officials wielding clubs and fire hoses, King and SCLC managed to shock many whites into action. As a result, legislation that eventually became

¹⁶ Bond, “The Media and the Movement,” 17, 24-27; and John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 460-471.

¹⁷ For instance, see Lentz, *Symbols, the Newsmagazines and Martin Luther King*, 21-41; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 400-402; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 7-8; and Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 203-204.

the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 gained substantial legitimacy.¹⁸

Of course, there was a significant downside to portraying the movement as little more than a morality play. In Birmingham and Selma, many complexities and ambiguities have remained largely absent from the public memory – including the earlier grassroots organizing built upon by SCLC, the role of local white elites in ending Jim Crow, and even the extent of violence by *both* blacks and whites.¹⁹ What has persisted is the harsh imagery of white supremacy portrayed on front pages and television sets around the world; if such brutality disappeared, then so did the problem, believed white America.

After Selma and the successful passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, however, the unstated partnership between King and the press began to fray. Images of rioters burning and looting in Watts and the fiery rhetoric of Black Power adherents replaced those of snarling police dogs attacking non-violent protesters and the optimistic language of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Although the reality was far more fluid between these two poles, press coverage became increasingly critical of the movement, including King. His crusade to "end the slums" in Chicago, which had the most entrenched housing segregation in the

¹⁸ Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 133-178; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 133-138. Garrow, however, also offers an excellent analysis of the dissimilarities in congressional, press, and public reactions to Selma and Birmingham.

¹⁹ See Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80 (1993): 75-112; Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1999); Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 157-162; and Walker, "A Media-Made Movement?" in *Media, Culture and the Modern American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Ward, 41-66.

North, and James Meredith's March Against Fear in Mississippi demonstrated the continuing challenges the movement faced. In both campaigns, whites had attacked non-violent protesters physically. But unlike in Selma and Birmingham, journalists were not sympathetic, instead undermining King's Chicago efforts as naïve and unsophisticated in a city dominated by Mayor Richard Daley's machine while marginalizing many Meredith march participants as "kooks," violent militants, or both.²⁰ Of course, this paled in comparison to the visceral press response to King's high-profile condemnation of the Vietnam War in April 1967, in which he was called a naïve communist dupe well outside of his expertise. Implied throughout the media's reaction was that U.S. foreign policy was "White Folks' Business."²¹ Thus, by the time King unveiled the Poor People's Campaign later that year, SCLC could count on little cooperation or sympathy from most of the mass media – even those sympathetic to the plight of the poor.²²

* * *

When King first floated the idea of a massive disobedience campaign during SCLC's August 1967 convention, press accounts reflected a tremendous trepidation, if not outright hostility. Although both the *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Constitution* acknowledged the worthiness of re-channeling the fury that drove the summer's rebellions, both concluded that the new campaign was a foolhardy one. Calling it a "formula for discord," the *Times*

²⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 483-487, 530-531; and Good, *The Trouble I've Seen*, 256-259.

²¹ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 402.

²² "Beyond Vietnam," April 4, 1967, in Box 12, Speeches, KP. See more discussion of King's Vietnam stance and media reaction in Chapter One.

opined that, “its mere announcement will give added strength to the powerful Congressional elements already convinced that the answer to urban unrest lies in repression.”²³ The *Tribune* and the newsmagazines dismissed King even more readily, calling it a desperate attempt by King and the SCLC to capture the agenda from the more militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). In particular, *U.S. News & World Report* “transformed King back into a familiar devil figure,” according to scholar Richard Lentz, and shrilly denounced his civil disobedience campaign as a riot waiting to happen.²⁴ Even the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Daily Defender*, considered by movement activists to be the nation’s premier black newspapers, opposed the idea, arguing that, “Marches, demonstrations have lost their appeal. In the present overheated atmosphere, mass civil disobedience would supply the spark that might ignite the power-keg ... What good would that do?”²⁵

Press coverage three months later changed little, as reporters remained fixated on the campaign’s potential for violence. Lost was the truly radical aspect of King’s proposal – its multiethnic nature. During the early December press conference in which he formally announced the Poor People’s Campaign, none of the reporters’ questions even touched on this, prompting King to reiterate the point. Coverage of most mainstream press outlets the next day confirmed journalists’ lack of interest in this angle. Only the *Los Angeles Times* and

²³ *New York Times*, August 17, 1967.

²⁴ Lentz, *Symbols, the Newsmagazines and Martin Luther King*, 254.

²⁵ Quote in *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 2, 1967. See *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1967; *Atlanta Constitution*, August 17, 1967; *Time*, August 25, 1967; *Newsweek*, August 28, 1967; and *U.S. News and World Report*, August 28, 1967.

Atlanta Constitution mentioned the multiethnic dimension, buried in the second-to-last paragraph, with the *Times* adding confidently – although with no evidence – that, “there is little indication that such assistance from those quarters is forthcoming.”²⁶ Black newspapers and members of the alternative press fared no better. Although declaring that, “King seeks all races,” the *Courier* suggested that this meant white by not explicitly mentioning any other groups.²⁷ Coverage by the *Defender* and the *Amsterdam News* failed to include this detail, while West Coast-based papers more attuned to a multiethnic freedom struggle, such as the black-owned *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the Marxist-leaning *People’s World*, skipped the announcement altogether.²⁸

Such coverage set the tone for the next several months. Between December 1967 and March 1968, SCLC aides slowly organized the campaign, sharpening its focus on Washington, delaying its start to Congress’ return after Easter in late April, and more explicitly laying out its multiethnic and class-based objectives. The upcoming campaign revealed a variety of tactical innovations for the SCLC, including an initial “lobby-in,” in

²⁶ “King Tells of Plans for Civil Disobedience,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1967.

²⁷ *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 16, 1967.

²⁸ The *Washington Post* ran a shortened version of reporter Jack Nelson’s *Times* story, cutting any mention of non-black poor participation. Also see *Washington Post*, October 24 and December 5, 1967; *Chicago Tribune*, December 5, 1967; *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 1967; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 5-6, 1967; *New York Times*, December 5, 1967; *New York Amsterdam News*, December 9 and 23, 1967; *Chicago Defender*, December 7, 12 and 14, 1967; and *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 9 and 23, 1967. Two late 1967 articles further demonstrate the *Defender’s* blind spots on organizing outside of the black freedom struggle: a piece on why Denver blacks have avoided a violent rebellion, without mentioning the dominant role of the city’s largest minority population, ethnic Mexicans; and a short article that characterized ethnic Mexican activists’ picketing of a Civil Rights Commission meeting as “the first time ... Mexicans threw their weight around out here.” *Daily Defender*, August 21, 1967, and *Defender*, December 2-8, 1967.

which a vanguard of poor people would present their demands to government officials; a Mule Train caravan symbolic of southern poverty; the planned participation of hundreds of non-black poor; mass arrest-provoking demonstrations and sit-ins of government offices; and eventually national boycotts in cities across the nation.²⁹ Yet journalists' framing of the campaign remained narrow. Depicting the campaign as a provocative departure from King's earlier genuinely non-violent efforts, a reckless attempt to "shut down" government operations, and an all-black affair, the press framed the PPC as a referendum on King's civil rights leadership and whether he could avoid violence.

Accordingly, the images and words of King and a few underlings – often in conflict with others – dominated coverage in prominent news outlets, including black publications. Focusing almost exclusively on King's positions on anti-poverty policies, campaign strategy, and even his presidential preferences, news articles avoided the nuts and bolts of recruitment and organizing. Instead, only when King involved himself in that process did such efforts make the news. King's pronouncements in Washington during an SCLC board meeting in February 1968 received extensive media coverage, as did King's "people-to-people" tours in Alabama and Mississippi in late February and March. But both instances still represented the narrow frames in which the media worked: charismatic leadership and the potential for conflict. Coverage quoted only black men by name, noted that organizers had "met no white resistance," and that authorities still expected the worst (for example, "Law

²⁹ "Statement of Purpose: Washington, D.C., Poor People's Campaign," January 1968, Box 49, Folder 3, and "Questions and Answers About the Washington Campaign," January 1968, Box 179, Folder 19, both in SCLC; and "Why We Need to Go to Washington" press conference transcript, Atlanta, January 16, 1968, Box 14, Speeches, KP.

Enforcement Men to Outnumber Protesters at March of Poor in Capital” in the *New York Times*). King in Washington was the sort of event favored by reporters, black and white. The board meeting featured a summit with former SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael and more than a hundred of his followers in the newly created Black United Front. At one point, Carmichael and company stormed out of the meeting over their opposition to the PPC’s nonviolent strategy, prompting the *Courier* to run a banner headline screaming “King, Carmichael in Strategy Clash.”³⁰ White newspapers were more subdued, most likely because they did not have full access to the meeting. But Carmichael remained an important angle in PPC news coverage – even after he promised to remain neutral – because of the media’s insistence on perpetuating an overly simplistic militant-moderate dichotomy.³¹

Missing from this coverage was the vast effort made by SCLC staff members and their ethnic Mexican, American Indian, and white allies to contact thousands of interested organizations and individuals for the campaign. If enterprising reporters had discussed campaign recruitment with representatives of national organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) or small community groups like Chicago’s West Side Organization, their publications did not reflect such efforts. Instead, an already-sparse coverage of community and anti-poverty organizing failed to mention the campaign – even when the organizations were intimately involved in PPC recruitment. *Defender* articles on

³⁰ *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 17, 1968.

³¹ Quotes in *New York Times*, March 4 and 20, 1968. See also *Times*, February 23 and March 5 and 27, 1968; *Washington Post*, January 17, February 6-8 and March 5, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, February 3 and 8, March 5, 1968; *Chicago Defender*, February 24-March 1, 1968; *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 17, 1968; March 16 and 30, 1968; and *The Worker*, March 10, 1968.

Chicago's Operation Breadbasket in early 1968 suggested no connection between that organization's boycotts and SCLC's other anti-poverty efforts. Neither did the *Amsterdam News* amid its coverage of black-Puerto Rican civil rights cooperation, nor *Newsweek* and *Time* in feature stories on César Chávez's dramatic fast in the name of the United Farm Workers.³²

As the hometown newspaper, the *Washington Post* proved a rare exception to the media's otherwise simplistic coverage of the campaign's preparation and beyond – if only because the newspaper provided a rare nuance on occasion. In a true rarity, the *Post* ran a PPC-related story that de-centered King and even suggested that organizers had achieved a certain amount of *success* in recruiting. “Quietly but steadily, SCLC is building some local support for its campaign,” stated the *Post*.³³ Reporter Bernadette Carey observed PPC official Tony Henry, on loan from the AFSC, pitching the campaign to community groups such as the YMCA. Yet Henry's voice remains the only one the reader hears. The author neither quotes nor even attributes anything to the YMCA or any other group, leaving the reader wondering what the response really was. In fact, despite some nuanced differences, the *Post's* coverage retained much in common with its counterparts: quoting only official

³² *Chicago Defender* (weekly), February 24-March 1, March 2-8, 16-22, 1968; *New York Amsterdam News*, March 16, 1968; *Time*, March 22, 1968; and *Newsweek*, March 25, 1968.

³³ *Washington Post*, March 5, 1968. Both the *Worker* and the *Christian Science Monitor* also delved into grassroots recruiting for the campaign, the latter suggesting that the challenge stemmed from not disinterest, but intimidation. A rally attendee “names one of the three (interested ladies). Quickly the chairman interrupts: Don't mention names, he implores, it only lets whites know on whom to put economic pressure. ... They fear loss of jobs or welfare benefits. He confides he shares the fear.” *The Worker*, March 24, 1968; and *Christian Science Monitor*, March 28, 1968.

black voices and questioning the continued efficacy of nonviolent protest, as if that was the only standard to which the campaign should be held.³⁴

Perhaps most glaring, however, was the near erasure of the non-black poor's interest and inclusion in a campaign supposedly about class. Throughout January, February, and March, campaign rhetoric in the form of King's speeches, SCLC press releases, and internal memos consistently included explicit references to the participation of ethnic Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and Appalachian whites.³⁵ Admittedly, SCLC aides had been slower to reach those activist circles with which they had not worked in the past, but aides had made considerable progress by early March in reaching groups that represented interests of the poor in those communities. After reassurances that the campaign indeed was not "a black thing," an array of activists began to commit.³⁶ Particularly after the Minority Group Conference on March 14, in which King and SCLC officials laid out their plans and then listened intently to the desires of their ethnic Mexican, Indian, and white counterparts, high-profile leaders of the Chicano movement agreed to participate. Participants recalled it

³⁴ *Washington Post*, March 5, 1968.

³⁵ See "Statement of Purpose: Washington, D.C., Poor People's Campaign," January 1968, Box 49, Folder 3, and "Questions and Answers About the Washington Campaign," January 1968, Box 179, Folder 19, both in SCLC; King, "Prelude to Tomorrow," Chicago, January 6, 1968; "Why We Need to Go to Washington" press conference transcript, Atlanta, January 16, 1968; "In Search of a Sense of Direction," at Vermont Street Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., February 7, 1968; mass meetings, Birmingham and Selma, Ala., February 15 and 16, 1968; address to Ministers Leadership Training Program, Miami, February 23, 1968; PPC press conference, Atlanta, March 4, 1968; "Local 1199 Salute to Freedom," March 10, 1968; mass meetings, Jennings' Temple Church, Greenwood, Miss., Chapel Hill Baptist, Clarksdale, Miss., First New Hope Baptist, Grenada, Miss., and St. Paul Methodist, Laurel, Miss., all on March 19, 1968; mass meeting, First Baptist Church, Eutaw, Ala., March 20, 1968; and PPC rallies, Augusta, Macon, Albany, and Waycross, Ga., March 23, 1968 – all in Box 14, Speeches, KP.

³⁶ José Angel Gutiérrez, interview by author.

as a tense, yet exhilarating exchange, one of historic proportion and perhaps the beginning of a “bona-fide coalition.”³⁷ But the event received almost no media attention. Although SCLC officials did not give the press access to the one-day conference, they heavily publicized the conference the next day, including making the diverse list of attendees available. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* ignored the conference. The *New York Times* ran a six-paragraph story on page thirty-six of the first section, acknowledging the meeting but little more, while the *Atlanta Constitution* gave it second billing behind King’s presidential preferences, apparently asked during the press conference. Black and alternative newspapers, in contrast, highlighted the conference’s multiethnic nature, particularly the *Courier*, the *People’s World*, and several Chicano newspapers.³⁸

Such uneven handling was not unusual, as news organizations routinely passed on opportunities to connect the social movements of the time. *Time* and *Newsweek*, which had all but ignored the Poor People’s Campaign during the first three months of 1968, also declined to connect King’s effort to the burgeoning Chicano movement. Perhaps

³⁷ Myles Horton letter to Andrew Young, April 5, 1968, in Box 177, Folder 20, , Reel 26, frame 00614, SCLC. Also, José Gutiérrez, Bernard Lafayette, and Leo Nieto, interviews by author; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; “Mexican American to Join Rev. Martin Luther King March on Washington,” Alianza press release, n.d., Box 31, Folder 28, and Della Rossa interview with Reies Tijerina, April 15, 1968, 1, Box 52, Folder 5, both in RLT; and Tijerina, *They Called Me ‘King Tiger,’* 103.

³⁸ “American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People’s Washington Campaign,” SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People’s Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO; *New York Times*, March 15, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1968; *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 30, 1968; *People’s World*, March 23, 1968; *El Gallo* (Denver), April 1968; *Inferno* (San Antonio), April 1968; and *La Raza* (Los Angeles), May 11, 1968. The *Chicago Daily Defender* also mentioned the conference, although the story was little more than a poorly edited version of the SCLC press release. March 23-29, 1968. The *Courier* also ran a photograph from the conference – of King, Tijerina, and an unidentified woman – but only after King’s death. *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 13, 1968.

uncomfortable with linking King with class demands, “*Time* and *Newsweek* responded to the dilemma with editorial silence,” according to journalism scholar Richard Lentz. “Their articles about Hispanic protest movements in which poverty was the central concern cited neither King nor the Poor People’s Campaign, even though the linkages should have been easy enough to establish and despite the fact that the articles appeared incomplete symbolically because of the omissions.”³⁹ Although a weakened César Chávez did not attend the Minority Group Conference because of a recent fast, the United Farm Workers sent representatives and scheduled a time for the two men to meet in California later in the month. This golden opportunity for news photographers to snap such a historic meeting, and perhaps link the two movements in the public consciousness, however, was lost after King cleared his schedule to go to Memphis.⁴⁰

Despite his staff’s opposition, King accepted James Lawson’s invitation to speak with the striking sanitation workers in Memphis because he viewed the situation as both a throwback to SCLC’s heyday and a campaign that brought the fights for social justice and economic injustice together. But because the Memphis movement projected an aura of SCLC’s halcyon days of mass rallies and protests in a southern setting, this detour also reinforced reporters’ narrow frames of the PPC. The images and rhetoric of the striking sanitation workers and their supporters recalled Selma, Birmingham, Albany, and other civil rights flashpoints during the height of the movement. “This city’s large Negro community

³⁹ Lentz, *Symbols, the Newsmagazines and Martin Luther King*, 279.

⁴⁰ *Newsweek*, March 25, 1968; *Time*, March 22, 1968; and “Dr. King Touring Nation in Poor People’s Campaign,” SCLC press release, March 17, 1968, Box 122, Folder 10, SCLC.

... has marshaled its forces to back the strikers as symbols of the Negro struggle for equal rights, better economic conditions, and human dignity,” reported the *New York Times*. “Each day, long lines of placard-bearing Negroes, including many children, walk slowly along Main Street all during business hours in an attempt to dramatize a boycott.”⁴¹ Despite the language of “poor people,” “human dignity,” and equal rights,” journalists and their readers saw African Americans and their white allies; the language of race subsumed that of class.

Memphis also reinforced the media’s preoccupation with violence. Press reports had made the risk of bloodshed an ever-present facet of the PPC, with *U.S. News* leading the charge by comparing the looming campaign to a “siege.”⁴² The events of March 28 – the first time many publications even acknowledged the strike – moved the mainstream media closer to *U.S. News*’ position. A melee erupted during a march when fifty or so youths, out of 6,000 marchers, began breaking windows along the parade route. Police officers responded by beating anybody they could find. The violence threw King’s conclusions that nonviolent protest could still work into doubt and seemed to confirm critics’ worst fears about the upcoming Washington campaign. Subsequent news reports consistently linked the violence to Washington, while giving campaign opponents as diverse as Bayard Rustin and Senator Robert Byrd ample space to ratchet up their critiques. Several editorial pages called the Memphis uprisings a “grim warning” and “a carnival of law-breaking” and reiterated

⁴¹ *New York Times*, March 18, 1968.

⁴² *U.S. News & World Report*, February 12 and March 18, 1968. See also *Atlanta Constitution*, December 5-6 and 15, 1967, and March 5, 1968; *Washington Post*, December 5, 1967, and February 6-8, 24 and March 5, 1968; *New York Times*, February 23 and March 5, 1968; and *Los Angeles Times*, December 5-7, 1967, and March 5, 1968.

their calls for the PPC's cancellation – this time with more urgency.⁴³ “For what the Memphis mini-riot shows is that non-violent protest if taken to the streets can be used as a cover by rowdy elements bent on violence,” the *New York Times* editorialized. “... The unquestionable effect was to solidify white sentiment against the strikers.”⁴⁴ The *Washington Post's* editorial, while absolving King of the violence, still counseled the SCLC leader to consider cancellation “following respectable precedent.”⁴⁵

Prominent black newspapers struck a different tone. While the *Defender* stated that King took “a gamble ... and lost,” suggesting a certain amount of responsibility, both the *Courier* and *Amsterdam News* editorialized in King's favor, calling interpretations blaming King for the violence a “deliberate misreading of events.”⁴⁶ Added the *Amsterdam News*, “The only circumstance in which Dr. King should call off his Washington March should be that, as he has hinted, ‘a positive commitment that they would do something this summer’ to aid the nation's slums.”⁴⁷ The campaign would go on, even after a sniper assassinated King on April

⁴³ Quotes in *Atlanta Constitution*, March 29, 1968, and *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 1968. Also, *New York Times*, March 29-30, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, March 29 and April 1, 1968; *Washington Post*, March 29 and April 3, 1968; and *U.S. News & World Report*, April 8, 1968.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, March 30, 1968.

⁴⁵ *Washington Post*, March 30, 1968.

⁴⁶ *Chicago Defender*, March 30-April 5, 1968; and *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 13, 1968. The *Courier* also ran the *Defender's* take on Memphis – in the form of a Sengstacke wire news analysis rather than an unsigned editorial – in its April 6 issue, but then clarified its position in an editorial the next week. This may have been in response to King's death. Other publications, such as *Jet* magazine, Chicano newspapers, and *The Worker*, did not reflect the march in Memphis probably because King's death six days later forced them to revamp their coverage at the last moment. Weekly newspapers routinely had to treat breaking news differently than their daily counterparts, particularly in the less nimble technological age of “hot type.” Therefore, coverage does not always reflect key events in a timely manner, if at all.

⁴⁷ *New York Amsterdam News*, April 6, 1968.

4, sending the nation's cities, including Washington, into violent convulsions far worse than any non-violent protests had ever sparked.

* * *

Hours after the assassination, Ralph Abernathy assured the press that SCLC would continue the campaign. During the next several weeks, new volunteers overwhelmed SCLC while a variety of one-time critics reversed field to support the campaign, ranging from prominent politicians to members of the Black Panther Party. But mainstream editorial uneasiness persisted. Although the *Constitution* viewed the march as “inevitable” and a “mild ... threat” in contrast to the uprisings after King’s death, it viewed passage of fair housing legislation as the most fitting memorial to King.⁴⁸ Most other papers agreed and suggested less-threatening alternatives to the Poor People’s Campaign. Spending much of its editorial praising Los Angeles black leaders for their successful efforts to avoid full-scale post-assassination violence, the *Los Angeles Times* vaguely called for “a genuine appreciation of the social grievances which undermine our whole national structure,” as well as the passage of the open housing provision.⁴⁹ What the writer did not do was endorse the campaign. Neither did the *Washington Post*, which suggested that congressmen go to where the poverty was rather than the poor come to them. A *Post* editorial two weeks later struck a more exasperated tone, fretting over the consequences of an army of the poor camping out on area parks and playgrounds. Yet it concluded that “the march must be allowed, even at

⁴⁸ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10-11, 1968.

⁴⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1968.

some inconvenience, to make its impression.”⁵⁰ Less vacillating was the other major news outlet in the nation’s capital, *U.S. News*. The conservative magazine did not hide its hostility, referring to the campaign as a “siege” by black “invaders,” emphasizing security issues and costs, and giving congressional critics such as Senator Robert Byrd an open forum to criticize the march without an SCLC response.⁵¹

Overall, press coverage between King’s death and the campaign’s beginning in May ranged from silence – epitomized by the *Wall Street Journal*, which ran just one full-length article on the PPC in April – to a low-level hostility. More ambivalent media organizations such as the *Post* and *Constitution* gave plenty of space to congressional foes and other opponents, such as Byrd and Thomas Matthew, a black New York surgeon and president of a self-help organization called National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization (NEGRO).⁵² Even *Newsweek*, characterized by Richard Lentz as the most reliably left-of-center newsmagazine, took a critical stance. Harping on SCLC aides’ organizational miscues, an inability to lay out clear goals, and the use of the “lingo of war” to describe their nonviolent campaign, *Newsweek* set a tone that suggested failure before the PPC had even begun.⁵³ After it was clear that the campaign would go forward, a steady stream of articles

⁵⁰ *Washington Post*, May 6, 1968. Also, *Post*, April 23, 1968.

⁵¹ Quotes in *U.S. News & World Report*, March 18, April 29 and May 6, 1968. Also, *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, April 8, 1968; John Rutherford and Tom Houck, interviews by Kay Shannon; and Lauren Watson, interview by author.

⁵² *Washington Post*, April 27-28, 1968. Also, *New York Times*, April 23, 1968; and *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1968.

⁵³ *Newsweek*, May 6, 1968; and Lentz, *Symbols, the Newsmagazines, and Martin Luther King*, 11-15.

began to appear in the mainstream press comparing Abernathy, usually unfavorably, to his deceased predecessor.⁵⁴

SCLC officials attempted to combat such characterizations in a variety of ways. For instance, Abernathy gracefully accepted a new civil rights bill on fair housing, but also suggested it was “not a solution to the problem but merely a step in the right direction.”⁵⁵ During the next several weeks, he, Coretta Scott King, and SCLC aides defended the campaign as a necessary demonstration of King’s vision – pointing to the many people who had since signed up for the campaign. The organization also deftly used Mrs. King as a sympathetic symbol, publicizing her pleas against the post-assassination violence and announcing her leadership in a welfare rights Mother’s Day march to kick off the construction of Resurrection City. One article even credited Mrs. King for the concept of an anti-poverty campaign. Such efforts seemed to have worked, especially on publications already sympathetic to the cause.⁵⁶

At least indirectly, black newspapers boosted the Poor People’s Campaign by calling for a sustained tone of African American unity and new efforts by the government to combat structural racism. “Beginning steps in the realization of Dr. Martin Luther King’s

⁵⁴ Examples are Paul Good, “‘No Man Can Fill Dr. King’s Shoes’ – But Abernathy Tries,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 26, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1968; *Houston Post*, May 19, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 26, 1968; and *Time*, May 31, 1968.

⁵⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 1968.

⁵⁶ *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, April 8, 11, 16, 19, 25, 1968; *New York Times*, April 6, 11, 19, 23, 28, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 9, 11, 23, 24, 1968; *Washington Post*, April 11, 18, 23-29, 1968; *U.S. News & World Report*, April 29 and May 6, 1968; *Newsweek*, May 6, 1968; and *Time*, May 3, 1968. *Time* was the one mainstream media organization to mention the PPC’s ethnic Mexican participants; unfortunately, it erred in reporting that César Chávez would lead the southwestern contingent.

dream of complete abolition of poverty and racism in America and the world are about to take place,” declared the *Pittsburgh Courier*, while others ran special columns by SCLC Executive Director Bill Rutherford, who pitched why they had to go to Washington.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, *Jet* ran one of the few glowing articles on Ralph Abernathy and the leadership he brought to SCLC and the PPC: “Even though daily newspapers saw fit to criticize the choice of Rev. Abernathy, describing him as ‘without the charisma and leadership ability,’ the SCLC family knew better.”⁵⁸ Perhaps black publications could have done more to advocate the campaign, but by not linking it with the violence that wracked Chicago, Washington, Baltimore, and other cities after the assassination, black newspapers undermined a key argument used by PPC foes. Instead, they looked to build upon the goodwill toward black issues that had emerged since April 4, as well as the calls for unity from such unlikely sources as Ron Karenga, the controversial cultural nationalist and founder of the US organization.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, such goodwill did not translate into mainstream media support as SCLC officials had hoped. Compounding this dilemma was the marginalization of the campaign’s non-black participants; campaign coverage had affirmed to middle class readers that “poor people” were black and nobody else.

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⁵⁷ *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 27, 1968; *New York Amsterdam News*, April 20 and 27, 1968; and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 11 and May 2, 1968.

⁵⁸ *Jet*, April 25, 1968.

⁵⁹ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 11, 1968.

For more than four months, the media narrowly framed the public's understanding and expectations for the Poor People's Campaign. But as poor people and their allies began to descend on Washington with a message of economic justice that crossed racial lines not just rhetorically but physically, journalists had an excellent opportunity to expand that lens. The campaign's vanguard Committee of 100 arrived in Washington on April 28 in order to present the campaign's demands to the appropriate Cabinet officers and members of Congress. Led by Ralph Abernathy, the committee was remarkably diverse – not only ethnically, but also in terms of class and gender. “The committee was multiracial and multiethnic,” recalled Andrew Young. “We did not appreciate it at the time, but with Martin's death, the Poor People's Campaign became the venue through which his coalition of conscience came together.”⁶⁰ In addition to statements by Abernathy, government officials heard several other voices from the nation's dispossessed. Victor Charlo and Melvin Thom, National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) activists, read formal campaign statements to the acting director of the Office of Economic Opportunity and to the Secretary of Interior, respectively, while other speakers included Latino organizers José Ortiz and Maria Varela, African American welfare rights activists Alberta Scott and Dovie Coleman, and unemployed white coal miners Robert Fulcher and Click Johnson. They demanded everything from a more efficient and respectful welfare process to a massive jobs

⁶⁰ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 480.

program. For the first time in any meaningful way, voices and images of individuals affiliated with the PPC, but not SCLC officials, made it into mainstream print.⁶¹

Despite its earlier ambivalence, the *Washington Post* gave non-black actors a sizable role in its narratives and images of the “lobby-in.” Substantive statements by Ortiz, Fulcher, and Johnson, as well as Miguel Bárragan, Martha Grass, Corky Gonzales, Mal Walker, and a few others appeared in the pages of the *Post*. Although the articles suggested at times that the visitors were disrespectful for being late or overly confrontational, the *Post* gave the representatives of the poor an open forum for their issues, generously quoting several non-leaders. For instance, the *Post* led their coverage of the first day with the words of Philadelphia meat-wrapper Karen Allen, who blasted Attorney General Ramsey Clark on the limitations of existing government programs and their impact on people’s diet and dignity:

You look down on people who live off welfare. You say how could we be poor and look so fat ... We eat boiled potatoes for breakfast ... fried for lunch ... baked for dinner ... Sure you get fat. When you train people for jobs, you train them for menial jobs nobody wants. Why doesn’t the Government train them for work they want and will enjoy?⁶²

Other participants’ quotes were similarly powerful. Even if a reader only scanned the *Post*, the campaign’s rainbow quality became obvious through photos of the speakers, including Corky Gonzales and Maria Varela.⁶³

⁶¹ “Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor Presented to Agencies of the U.S. Government by the Poor People’s Campaign and Its Committee of 100,” April 29-30, 1968, Box 177, Folder 24, SCLC.

⁶² *Washington Post*, April 30, 1968.

⁶³ *Washington Post*, April 29-30 and May 1-2, 1968.

Other mainstream newspapers' reports paled in comparison, often quoting and picturing only Ralph Abernathy while barely mentioning the presence of non-black activists. Coverage by the *Los Angeles Times* symbolized this stark contrast. In its three days of reporting on the vanguard's capital visit, the *Times* published one photo, quoted exactly four people and mentioned Abernathy in each day's headline. The *Times* printed perhaps the most symbolically important photograph of the early campaign: a four-column, front-page picture of Abernathy arm-in-arm with Click Johnson, Corky Gonzales, and other members of the Committee of 100. Yet the caption did not identify any of the participants, and because of the wide camera angle, readers could have mistaken Gonzales and others as white, not ethnic Mexican. Quotes came solely from Abernathy, SCLC official Walter Fauntroy, and two U.S. senators. The last article focused on Abernathy's sharing of an erroneous report that several PPC supporters were shot in Mississippi. The *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* echoed this treatment, without the photograph. And in the *Journal* and three newsmagazines, a reader would not even know if other racial groups had been present. Instead, they used a common media practice to highlight the delegates' most extreme statements. In the *Constitution*, for instance, the first person quoted was an unnamed black "militant" who told officials, "Baby, you better come on down to earth, because if you don't, there ain't gonna be no more earth."⁶⁴ Several reports also stressed Abernathy's lateness and

⁶⁴ *Atlanta Constitution*, April 30, 1968.

remorseless response when challenged on this: “We’ve been waiting on the white man for 100 years, and today we just decided to let them wait on us.”⁶⁵

With the exception of *Jet* magazine, the black and alternative press struggled to capture the vanguard’s diversity. Declaring the group “a very unlikely coalition,” *Jet* gave its predominantly working-class readers a taste of the different people and issues brought to Washington, especially the many women activists who formed much of the campaign’s support. The magazine quoted Tillie Walker, a Mandan Indian from Denver who argued that “poverty is not a question of color,” and Lela Mae Brooks, an African American from Sunflower County, Mississippi, who told government officials how her heart medicine gutted her paltry benefits. Particularly moving were the comments of Peggy Terry, the native white Alabaman who had become a welfare rights activist in Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood. “I’ve discovered that kicking black people didn’t fill my belly or pay my rent,” she stated, explaining why she joined the Poor People’s Campaign. “And it didn’t make the cotton I picked weigh a pound more.”⁶⁶ The magazine’s black counterparts in the media were less thorough. Although the *Defender* ran an editorial praising the campaign’s first phase, calling it an “unexpected success,” the newspaper published nothing more than a photograph, and then only identified Abernathy.⁶⁷ The *Los Angeles Sentinel* and *New York Amsterdam News* erased the Committee of 100 altogether. In an intriguing but cryptic editorial, Baltimore’s

⁶⁵ Quote in *New York Times*, April 30, 1968. *Los Angeles Times*, April 30 and May 1-2, 1968; *Chicago Tribune*, April 29-30 and May 1-2, 1968; *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 1968; *Time*, May 10, 1968; *U.S. News & World Report*, May 13, 1968; and *Newsweek*, May 13, 1968.

⁶⁶ *Jet*, May 16, 1968.

⁶⁷ *Chicago Defender*, May 11-17, 1968.

Afro-American suggested a new racial coalition when it quoted a 70-year-old African American woman who “spoke to an Indian today” for the first time. But the paper never made the context clear and offered no other details. Even white leftist newspapers and their counterparts in the Chicano Press Association did not mention the multiethnic vanguard, focusing exclusively on Abernathy and vague policy demands.⁶⁸

The initial Washington “lobby-in,” as some journalists called it, represented one of SCLC’s best efforts at projecting the multiethnic vision of the Poor People’s Campaign. The organization allowed up to a few dozen activists from all walks of life, groups, and regions to tell Cabinet secretaries and members of Congress their stories and demands – and all in their own words. This included allowing two American Indian youth activists the opportunity to deliver the campaign’s initial presentations to two agencies. Voices of the poor were clearly far more than black, or even black and white. Yet, despite such efforts, SCLC failed to interest most journalists. PPC officials continued to stress inclusion and a multiethnic campaign throughout their time in Washington, but this initial tepid response by the press very well may have affected how Abernathy and his top aides subsequently approached the media and their coalitional partners.

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⁶⁸ *Jet*, May 16, 1968; *Chicago Defender*, May 4-10, 1968; *Afro-American*, May 4, 1968; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 9, 1968; *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1968; *The Worker*, May 5 and 21, 1968; and *People’s World*, May 4, 1968. Because the papers of the nascent Chicano Press Association came out monthly at best, they only covered the direct action highlights of the campaign in May and June. For instance, *La Raza*, edited by campaign supporter and participant Elizar Risco, did not publish an April issue at all.

While the Washington phase of the campaign offered media observers the opportunity to move beyond a black-and-white civil rights lens, mainstream journalists only intensified this approach. Media coverage of four developments in particular demonstrated that most of the press was incapable, unwilling, or both to judge the campaign beyond a framework reporters had developed and used for more than a decade. Those developments were: the journey and arrival of the three multiethnic caravans from the West; the controversy over Bayard Rustin's hiring and then firing as organizer of the Solidarity Day march; the management and mood of Solidarity Day itself; and the portrayal and dominance of Resurrection City, often to the detriment of other aspects of the campaign.

A day after the vanguard's trip to Washington ended, the first of eight caravans began to roll across the nation, but it quickly became clear that some caravans were of more interest than others. In particular, both the mainstream and African American media closely followed the three caravans from the South, literally filing daily reports as they wandered through several civil rights "flashpoints," including Selma and Montgomery, the latter on the day Alabama Governor Lurleen Wallace lay in state. Photographs of the Mule Train, black marchers on Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge, and Ralph Abernathy in overalls and a carpenter's apron dominated daily news coverage and – like the Memphis rallies – harkened back to the time when newspaper editors and the Northern liberal public viewed the freedom struggle as a southern movement. In contrast, press coverage of the Northeast and Midwest caravans proved more sporadic at first, especially among white newspapers, only gaining prominence after an unknown assailant stabbed an anti-campaign protester in the arm in Boston. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* made this first story of

violence front-page news, reporting that a member of the campaign had assaulted self-described “Polish freedom fighter” Josef Mlot-Mroz in his car. Similarly, the Midwest caravan – and the many gang members from Chicago and Milwaukee participating – rose to national prominence only after police and marchers scuffled outside of Detroit’s Cobo Hall. Black papers such as the *Defender*, *Courier*, and *Amsterdam News* provided more even-handed coverage of the Northeastern and Midwestern caravans, downplaying the role of violence. If anything, they pointed out the remarkable *lack* of discord among the marchers.⁶⁹

Lost in the shuffle, however, were the three caravans based in the West. Called the Western, San Francisco, and Indian Trail, these caravans best symbolized the campaign’s idealistic vision – thoroughly multiethnic in nature and ultimately self-sacrificing, thanks to the arduous 3,000-mile trek to Washington. Yet both the mainstream press and its black counterparts largely ignored them, leaving only the leftist *People’s World* and *The Worker* to provide routine progress reports. The *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Atlanta Constitution* devoted no more than a few paragraphs each to the Western campaigners between May 16 and May 23, while the newsmagazines reported virtually nothing. Even more remarkable was the *Los Angeles Times*, which had covered the Western caravan’s departure from Will Rogers Park in Watts and presumably had the resources to follow at least one of the California-based caravans. Instead, while other California newspapers such as the *People’s World* and, to a lesser extent, the black *Los Angeles Sentinel*, gave periodic

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, May 9 and 11, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, May 11 and 14-15, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 7 and 9, 17-23, 1968; *Chicago Tribune*, 12-14, 17-25, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, May 12-24, 1968; *Pittsburgh Courier* and *New York Amsterdam News*, both May 11, 18 and 25, 1968; and *Chicago Defender*, May 11-17 and 18-24, 1968.

updates on the Western contingent's journey, *Times* coverage echoed its eastern counterparts. The *Times*, as well as the *Post*, thoroughly reported on one group's journey: that of the Reverend James Mims' harrowing trip to Washington. Rather than take five days to traverse the country, Mims and a few dozen African American parishioners rode a bus that suffered four major breakdowns and took nearly thirteen days before arriving in the nation's capital. Although certainly an interesting and newsworthy story, Mims' journey was one of all African Americans except for a white bus driver – a striking contrast considering the diversity of the Western caravans.⁷⁰

Attempts by participants of the Western caravans to receive national press also were complicated by competition with Resurrection City. By the time the Western Caravan left Los Angeles, marchers from two of the southern caravans had begun to occupy Resurrection City. From the very beginning, the tent city had captured the imagination of reporters – in both productive and less productive ways. Even before Ralph Abernathy drove in the shantytown's first stake in the shadow of the Washington Mall's monuments, reports of cost overruns, construction delays, and unhappy campaigners with the city's lack of basic facilities dominated news reports. From Bernard Lafayette's inflated claim that SCLC needed \$3 million more to finish the city's housing – in reality, it was \$84,000 – to a general lack of coordination among campaign officials, even reporters "sympathetic to the

⁷⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 19 and 26 and June 6, 1968; *New York Times*, May 18 and 20, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, May 16, 1968; *People's World*, May 18 and 25, and June 1, 1968; *Worker*, May 28 and June 2, 1968; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 16, 1968; and *Washington Post*, May 26, 1968. See Chapter Three for a more thorough discussion of the Los Angeles-based Western Caravan and its journey across the nation.

undertaking” had grown impatient, according to independent journalist Charles Fager.⁷¹ After a few days, reporters felt mistreated by Resurrection City marshals, SCLC-deputized youths (and often gang members from Chicago) who greatly limited press access to the encampment and its residents. Access increased only when senior officials, such as James Bevel, were present. Thus, much of the reporting corps became fed up with the “petty harassment they continued to encounter from the marshals and with the now obvious runaround by staff at the camp.”⁷² Headlines from the *Post* reflected the frustration: “ ‘Resurrection City’ Needs More Money,” “ ‘City’ of Poor Encounters Difficulties,” “March Problems Spur Emergency Meeting,” “Marshals Picked From Gangs,” “Financial Crises Hit Marchers.”⁷³ The *Tribune*, which rarely ran PPC articles on its cover, highlighted on the front page the “poor’s” use of a plane to go to Washington, as well as the specter of violence. Other daily campaign wrap-up articles dwelled on the capital’s imperiled tourism industry and the ouster of some Chicago gang members. Although ridiculing him editorially, the *Constitution* gave Georgia Governor Lester Maddox, a white supremacist, prominent news space to take potshots at the campaign, while *U.S. News* continued its message of impending violence and unreasonable demands. Reporters pinned much of the disorganization on Ralph Abernathy.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 37.

⁷² Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 42.

⁷³ *Washington Post*, May 14, 16-18, 1968.

⁷⁴ *U.S. News & World Report*, May 13, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, May 15, 16 and 18, 1968; and *Chicago Tribune*, May 12 and 21-22, 1968; Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 21-29. Examples of such coverage of Abernathy are Paul Good, “ ‘No Man Can Fill Dr. King’s Shoes’ – But Abernathy Tries; He Tries to

Thus, it might have been expected that after the Western caravans arrived May 23 in Washington, the national press would have begun to pay attention to them as well. Instead, little changed as far as the media was concerned. For four days, news reports virtually ignored their presence. Again, not even the *Los Angeles Times* mentioned the arrival; staff writer Vincent Burke wrote about the campaign's first arrests instead.⁷⁵ Granted, much of the ethnic Mexican contingent temporarily moved into the Hawthorne School about a mile away because of Resurrection City's housing shortage, mud, and leadership issues. Only when Reies López Tijerina and other ethnic Mexican activists began to complain about mistreatment and exclusion did the press begin to notice. "Non-Negro participants ... said resentment had been 'building up for weeks' among non-Negro groups but had been 'played down for the sake of unity,' " wrote the *Times*' Ben Franklin, at first the only reporter to document Tijerina's concerns of "being ignored by the campaign's leaders and 'abused' by militant rank-and-file blacks."⁷⁶

Two days later, on May 27, Tijerina called an impromptu press conference to repeat his concerns, but this time at the gates of Resurrection City. As a skilled manipulator of the press himself, Tijerina recognized where journalists had congregated and what grabbed their attention. That the first substantive recognition of ethnic Mexican and other non-black participants came in the context of interethnic discord, not cooperation, was not a

Fill Dr. King's Shoes," *New York Times Magazine*, May 26, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 25, 1968; *Time*, May 31, 1968; and *Afro-American*, June 8, 1968.

⁷⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1968.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, May 26, 1968.

coincidence. Indeed, exactly once did any mainstream or black newspaper explore in print why *these* particular poor people had made the trip to Washington: a *Post* article in the local section about the “special set of problems” brought by the southwestern contingent.⁷⁷

Rather, the norm was to ignore ethnic Mexicans and American Indians, and anyone else who was not black or white. Therefore, during the next several weeks, ethnic Mexicans received attention only when Tijerina angrily – and very publicly – demanded it.⁷⁸

* * *

Another demonstration of the mainstream media’s narrow framing was the treatment of Bayard Rustin’s hiring as organizer of the Solidarity Day rally, and his subsequent resignation less than two weeks later. On May 24, Rustin and Abernathy held a press conference in which Rustin announced his new role in organizing Solidarity Day, a one-day rally set for June 19 in front of the Lincoln Memorial. SCLC hopes were that Rustin, an associate of King’s since the 1950s and widely credited for organizing the 1963 March on Washington, could repeat his earlier success. When Martin Luther King Jr. first unveiled the campaign, Rustin had viewed it as fraught with peril. Although supportive of coalitional politics and a broad economic program as “lessons of the long hot summer,” Rustin remained skeptical that “SCLC can maintain control and discipline over the April demonstration.”⁷⁹ Rustin also had wished to maintain ties to the Johnson administration and

⁷⁷ *Washington Post*, May 28, 1968.

⁷⁸ *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Atlanta Constitution*, May 28, 1968; *Jet*, June 13, 1968; and *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 3, 1968.

⁷⁹ Bayard Rustin, “Memo on the Spring Protest in Washington, D.C.,” in *Down the Line*, ed. Rustin, 204.

more conservative African American leaders such as the NAACP's Roy Wilkins. But after King died, Rustin tempered his criticism and eventually agreed to plan the Solidarity Day program in order to tighten the campaign's message.⁸⁰

The absence of a clear message had been a longstanding media criticism of the campaign. Editorial desks insisted that the campaign avoid a vague and unattainable "blue-sky, 59-page manifesto of demands," as *Time* and others had characterized the Committee of 100's initial objectives.⁸¹ Indeed, King earlier had admitted to not wanting to tie the campaign to specific congressional bills, or writing up legislation themselves, which Andrew Young characterized as "building in failure."⁸² Yet, a close look at the demands suggests numerous actionable policy requests, such as the rigorous enforcement of housing provisions in the Civil Rights Act of 1968, institution of a clear and simple appeals procedure for maximum feasible participation, and elimination of the "man in the house" rule for welfare benefits.⁸³ In reality, reporters had their own ulterior motive for making such demands: a limited number of clearly articulated objectives created an unambiguous standard for success and failure – and thus made their jobs easier. Not unlike sports

⁸⁰ *New York Times*, May 25, 1968.

⁸¹ *Time*, June 7, 1968.

⁸² Yglesias, "Dr. King's March," March 31, 1968. King specifically cited the Selma campaign of 1965 as an example. Although told by President Johnson and others that a voting rights act could not be passed, a large militant demonstration forced government officials to find a solution.

⁸³ "Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor Presented to Agencies of the U.S. Government by the Poor People's Campaign and Its Committee of 100," April 29-30 and May 1, 1968, Box 177, Folder 24, SCLC.

reporting, in which the winners and losers are obvious, Washington correspondents often framed political battles in the same way: who won, who lost, and by how much.

Therefore, Rustin's appointment received widespread praise among mainstream editors and reporters. Calling him a "realist" and "pragmatist," the *New York Times* applauded his "outstanding credentials as an organizer of massive marches" and experience as "a jail-going pacifist and civil rights militant when Abernathy was still in grade school."⁸⁴ And when Rustin released a list of specific demands, a *Post* editorial expressed cautious optimism: "With the formulation of some definite goals, the Poor People's Campaign can now turn to sympathetic members of Congress and the Administration with hope for effective action."⁸⁵ Similar to the Freedom Budget, which Rustin had released in 1966 and King had endorsed, the "Call to Americans of Goodwill" included specific "attainable" legislative and policy solutions, including a recommitment to the Full Employment Act of 1946, adoption of a pending housing and urban development bill, repeal of punitive welfare restrictions, extension of collective bargaining rights to farm workers, and a restoration of earlier budget cuts to a variety of social programs. Black newspapers, including the *Amsterdam News* which ran Rustin's periodic column, endorsed Rustin's appointment, if not as enthusiastically as their white counterparts. While *Jet* called it "a crucial decision," the *Courier* viewed Rustin's involvement – and Roy Wilkins' belated endorsement of the

⁸⁴ *New York Times*, June 2, 1968.

⁸⁵ *Washington Post*, June 5, 1968.

campaign – as a sign of African American unity.⁸⁶ More leftist papers made no comment until after Rustin resigned.⁸⁷

None of the newspapers, however, predicted the ugly schism to which Rustin's declaration led just days later. Rather than build unity and a firm foundation of organization and discipline, Rustin's goodwill message rankled both SCLC officials and other participants of the campaign. Soon after Rustin unveiled his plans for Solidarity Day in a solo news conference, SCLC's Hosea Williams called Rustin's rationale "a lot of foolishness," saying he had "no business" issuing any objectives.⁸⁸ Offended, Rustin demanded a clarification of his authority from Abernathy, who, in gentler language, agreed with Williams. As a result, Rustin resigned and the mainstream press audibly groaned. In what Charles Fager calls a key moment, many reporters turned on the campaign, linking Rustin to the 1963 march's moral authority and thus painting his resignation as perhaps a fatal blow to a hopelessly disorganized campaign. Capturing that mood, the *New York Times* wrote, "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."⁸⁹ "Get it together," demanded a *Post* editorial, while the paper's news reports labeled the

⁸⁶ *Jet*, June 6, 1968; and *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 8, 1968.

⁸⁷ *Washington Post*, June 4, 1968; *New York Times*, May 25 and June 3, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, June 1, 3 and 7, 1968; *Time*, May 31 and June 7, 1968; *Wall Street Journal*, June 10, 1968; *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 8, 1968; *New York Amsterdam News*, June 1, 1968; and *Jet*, June 6, 1968.

⁸⁸ *Washington Post*, June 7, 1968.

⁸⁹ *New York Times*, June 8, 1968; and Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 62-63.

campaign a “fiasco” with a “leadership crisis.”⁹⁰ Other publications called the campaign a “nightmare,” where “squabbles replace mud,” and at least the *Constitution*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* began to reduce their campaign coverage substantially.⁹¹ Renewed questions emerged over Abernathy’s ability to lead, and if SCLC could survive without King. At least a few members of the black press had their own critical words, echoing the mainstream media’s condemnation of the campaign’s leadership. “The Poor People’s Campaign lost, fired, disassembled, and threw out Bayard Rustin and a good deal of its momentum,” wrote the *Defender’s* Terry Harris, who argued that the incident demonstrated that “SCLC isn’t democratic.”⁹² The *Amsterdam News*, for which Rustin was a columnist, also suggested a leadership breakdown. Yet the newspaper still endorsed Solidarity Day, as did its less vocal colleagues at the *Courier*, *Afro-American*, and *Jet*.⁹³

By placing Rustin’s departure in a context of leadership squabbles, turf battles, and personality conflicts, however, reporters – both black and white – offered a deeply simplistic analysis of the Rustin situation. The SCLC’s rejection of Rustin and his demands was not a sign of naivety, but recognition of the pitfalls of drastically lowering expectations. Also, Abernathy called Rustin’s statement “not comprehensive enough” for good reason. As both the *Worker* and *People’s World* prominently pointed out, a careful study of Rustin’s fourteen points demonstrates that he excluded several issues of utmost importance to the campaign’s

⁹⁰ *Washington Post*, June 9, 1968.

⁹¹ *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1968; *New York Times*, June 8, 1968; and *Chicago Tribune*, June 9, 1968.

⁹² *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 11, 1968.

⁹³ *New York Amsterdam News*, June 15, 1968; *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 13, 1968; and *Jet*, June 13, 1968.

non-black participants. Despite the language of “black and white, brown and red,” the declaration left out demands for land rights, fishing rights, greater prosecution for police brutality, and an immediate negotiated end to the Vietnam War. As a result, SCLC’s partners in the campaign were livid, particularly since Reies Tijerina had made such a spectacle over their exclusion earlier in the week. Perhaps Abernathy should have expected Rustin, as a strong supporter of the administration and Vice President Hubert Humphrey’s presidential candidacy, to not embrace radical objectives, especially regarding the Vietnam War. But to Abernathy’s credit, challenging Rustin’s attempt to narrow the campaign’s scope suggested he had heard the complaints by Tijerina, Gonzales, and others. Unfortunately, this distinction mattered little in the nation’s newsrooms.⁹⁴

* * *

The media’s swift and harsh response to Rustin’s departure also suggested something else: the importance journalists placed on the Solidarity Day rally. Not only was the one-day march an opportunity for campaign officials to leave Washington on a high note and perhaps with something tangible, but also a chance to recall the triumphant 1963 March on Washington in some way. As SCLC communications director Tom Offenburger put it, it was “a day for middle-class America,” something “the press easily understood.”⁹⁵ Thus, when Sterling Tucker, the respected executive director of the Urban League’s Washington chapter, replaced Bayard Rustin as the rally’s organizer, media observers remained cautiously

⁹⁴ *People’s World*, June 15, 1968; and *Worker*, June 11, 1968. Two mainstream newspapers acknowledged aspects of this, but buried it in their coverage. *Atlanta Constitution*, June 11, 1968; and *Chicago Tribune*, June 8, 1968.

⁹⁵ Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon.

optimistic. And when Abernathy and Tucker released a revised list of goals – goals not all that different from Rustin’s it turned out – at least a few editorial writers brightened some more.⁹⁶ Perhaps the spirit embodied by King’s “Dream” speech could be found again somehow on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Solidarity Day “can be effective only if the march, like the great march on Washington of 1963 led by Dr. Martin Luther King, is conducted with dignity and discipline,” stated the *Washington Post*.⁹⁷ Of course, the context was different in 1968 – the anger, the frustration, the war, and the betrayals. And therefore, Solidarity Day needed to be judged upon its own merits. Comparisons to 1963 raised expectations unnecessarily.

Yet the national media insisted on judging Solidarity Day against the 1963 march, and thus, even amid some praise, the press undermined the former’s modest accomplishments. Turnout from the white middle class had been strong, and the rally remained orderly. Images of thousands of people surrounding the Reflecting Pool looked eerily familiar on front pages across the country. But much everything else was different, and in the eyes of the mainstream press, Solidarity Day did not compare favorably. Throughout its extensive coverage of Solidarity Day, the *New York Times* reminded the reader of how it fell short: “Anger Replaces the Hopes of ’63” and “Patience Worn Thin.” Missing, according to the *Times*, was the camaraderie, the Protestant establishment, the “exhilarating hope and promise.” Replacing them were a “cool anger, “apocalyptic

⁹⁶ *Washington Post*, June 13-14, 1968.

⁹⁷ *Washington Post*, June 16, 1968.

messages,” and signs that read, “This is your last chance for nonviolence.”⁹⁸ Other publications provided similar observations, while adding to the list of the march’s deficiencies. “The program ran two hours behind schedule,” noted the *Los Angeles Times*, and many marchers had left without hearing Coretta Scott King or Ralph Abernathy. The *Post* pointed out how much smaller it was than the 1963 march – 50,000 compared to 250,000 – although participants claimed the press and authorities lowballed the crowd estimate by at least 50,000. As *Newsweek* put it, “Solidarity Day 1968 was no match for the 1963 March on Washington.”⁹⁹

Negative comparisons did not dominate the coverage of alternative press outlets. In both black newspapers and their leftist and Spanish-language counterparts, coverage uniformly praised Solidarity Day for its own accomplishments, particularly the expansive role of women. While organizers of the 1963 march did not allow female speakers on stage, women held key speaking and leadership positions five years later. One *Defender* report declared that the campaign had “‘gotten itself together’ and won new life,” while another praised women for setting the march’s hopeful yet hard-hitting tone.¹⁰⁰ Although Ralph Abernathy was the headliner, reporter Ethel Payne said that Coretta Scott King, National Council of Negro Women President Dorothy Height, and American Indian activist Martha Grass stole the show, so to speak – and appropriately so, considering how poverty affected

⁹⁸ *New York Times*, June 20, 1968.

⁹⁹ Quote in *Newsweek*, July 1, 1968. Also, *Time*, June 28, 1968; *Washington Post*, June 20, 1968; and *Atlanta Constitution*, June 20, 1968.

¹⁰⁰ *Chicago Defender*, June 22-28, 1968.

non-white women disproportionately. *The Worker*, which cited a higher crowd estimate of 100,000, also highlighted women speakers, including black performer Eartha Kitt, who spoke Spanish, and white welfare union activist Peggy Terry. Perhaps the *Baltimore Afro-American* stated it best in its coverage of the rally's women speakers: "Some may call it 'Soul Power,' others may scream 'Black Power,' and yet others may say 'Poor Power,' but whatever the phrases may be, it was crystal clear that above all else, there was 'Woman Power.'"¹⁰¹ From King and Kitt to singer Nancy Wilson and Rosa Parks, the *Afro-American* made clear who was behind the rally's success – and who the rally's success might most affect.¹⁰²

* * *

As telling as the media's treatment of the caravans, the Bayard Rustin incident, and Solidarity Day was, no single aspect of the campaign captured the attention of journalists as Resurrection City itself. The tent city simply dominated press coverage. Starting with the intrigue over whether the government would grant a permit for such an encampment on the Washington Mall, the space where campaign participants lived for six weeks became a personality of its own. From mainstream newspapers and magazines to the black and white alternative press, the shantytown on the Mall loomed over everything else – the reasons why people were there, the demonstrations themselves, even the death of Dr. King. Also

¹⁰¹ *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 22, 1968.

¹⁰² *Worker*, June 23, 1968; and *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 22, 1968. The publishing schedule of some weekly newspapers, such as the *New York Amsterdam News* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, kept them from reporting on Solidarity Day before police closed Resurrection City and arrested Ralph Abernathy. Thus, their coverage proved less hopeful than some of their counterparts.

overshadowed was Resurrection City's sister "city," the Hawthorne School, where a genuine multiethnic community developed among hundreds of ethnic Mexicans, American Indians, whites, and African Americans. In fact, other than passing mentions of Hawthorne, which was about a mile away from the Mall, journalists ignored it. Of course, because Hawthorne was a closed building rather than an open campground, access was more difficult. While Resurrection City marshals had to combat constant breaches of the "snow wall" around the city, the young Chicano security guards at Hawthorne only had a handful of doors to secure. Therefore, why run such a gantlet? Resurrection City became the obvious place for journalists to go – it featured more accessibility, more visiting dignitaries (including both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates), and perhaps most importantly, more potential for drama, conflict, and violence.¹⁰³

Despite chronic reports of confusion and looming violence in Resurrection City, almost every newspaper and magazine also wanted to capture the pulse of this seemingly thriving city within a city. Whether they represented the sympathetic *People's World*, the hostile *Chicago Tribune*, or the many publications that fell in between, reporters tried to capture the city's unique flavor, as it grew to nearly 2,500 residents in late May and early June. *Newsweek*, for instance, suggested the city had begun to jell, calling it a "a bustling microcosmic city ... with its own mayor, city hall, doctors, dentists, barbers, psychiatrists, day-care centers, communal comfort stations, juvenile delinquents, gendarmerie, urban

¹⁰³ Berry, "The anger and problems and sickness." In an election year, the city attracted a remarkable number of politicians, including Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Senators Robert F. Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, Charles Percy, and Edward Brooke, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and Mayors Walter Washington, Ivan Allen, and John Lindsay. For more on Resurrection City celebrity sightings, see Chapter Three.

planning and urban blight.”¹⁰⁴ Other media organizations struck similar notes amid a more critical analysis. For instance, *Time* described Resurrection City as a “revival meeting within a carnival within an army camp,” taking on “a unique throbbing personality” through a rich diversity of people and a high level of creativity. In a stereotypical yet well-intentioned gesture, *Time* proclaimed the entertainment as “the finest in town,” featuring jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, soul performers, freedom singers, and revivalists.¹⁰⁵ Declaring that Resurrection City had created “its own style,” the *Washington Post* provided glimpses of life inside the tent city.¹⁰⁶ From black Mississippians and followers of Reies Tijerina to ex-convict-turned artist George Stewart, the *Post* illustrated the sheer diversity and creativity represented by the campers. Tents sported slogans such as “The White House,” “The Great Society,” and “Sugar Shack,” while soul music blared and men played checkers. Men lined up for haircuts and children played in the Coretta Scott King Day Care Center. If residents did not meet during demonstrations, they saw each other in the line for food, at the Poor People’s University, or in the Many Races Soul Center. Ironically, perhaps the most sympathetic and intimate portrait of Resurrection City in the mainstream press came two weeks after police shut down the city. Without sugarcoating the problems the tent city

¹⁰⁴ *Newsweek*, June 3, 1968.

¹⁰⁵ *Time*, May 31, 1968.

¹⁰⁶ *Washington Post*, May 20, 1968.

faced, black freelance writer Faith Berry wrote in *New York Times Magazine* that still “some residents called it the only real home they had ever had.”¹⁰⁷

Fewer black newspapers tried to capture the rhythm of Resurrection City with *Jet* magazine as one prominent exception. Given its working class black audience, such an editorial decision seemed particularly appropriate. Week after week, *Jet* correspondents gave its readers an inside look into Resurrection City – but not just the impact of forty-four straight hours of rain, disagreements among ethnic groups, or the failure of shower facilities to provide running water. Calling Resurrection City a “Model Community Run by Poor,” *Jet*’s Simeon Booker offered a weekly glimpse through words and extensive images of the people who called the city home.¹⁰⁸ Not unlike the positive portrayals in the mainstream press, *Jet* showed its readers Resurrection City residents seeing the doctor, skipping rope, cleaning the camp, visiting with celebrities, or just waiting for the next protest. But unlike its white counterparts, similar coverage continued literally to the day when 2,000 police officers in riot gear tore down Resurrection City. In contrast, other black newspapers including the *Defender*, *Amsterdam News*, and *Afro-American*, while generally supportive in their writing, made little effort to dig below the surface perceptions of the tent city. As the rains came and mud

¹⁰⁷ Quote in Berry, “The anger and problems and sickness.” See also *Washington Post*, May 12, 15, 19, 24 and 28, 1968; *New York Times*, May 24, 1968; *Worker*, May 26, 1968; *Chicago Tribune*, May 21 and June 23, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, May 27, 1968; and Berry, “The anger and problems and sickness.”

¹⁰⁸ *Jet*, June 6, 1968. For six straight weeks, the magazine’s “The Week’s Best Photos” featured pictures from Resurrection City.

overwhelmed residents, many black newspapers became indistinguishable from white newspapers, either reducing their coverage or harping on the city's poor conditions.¹⁰⁹

For the white press, the poor weather, combined with perceived leadership deficiencies and security issues, tested the best of temperaments. After the first report of a journalist being beaten up, any and all altercations – verbal or otherwise – shot to the top of news stories. Papers once capable of running a sympathetic story on occasion became as consistently critical as the *Chicago Tribune*, which had remarkably tried to connect Robert Kennedy's death to the “lawlessness” of Resurrection City.¹¹⁰ And all of the coverage focused on the embattled tent city. Rumors of rampant robberies, assaults, rapes, and rape attempts became fact, even though campaign officials vehemently argued that such reports were real but exaggerated. Acute health concerns suddenly received more prominent play. And report after report told of people abandoning the city and going home in droves, while never saying that other poor people and their allies arrived every day to replace them in the ranks. Resurrection City, and thus the campaign, had gone from an inconvenience to a virtual nightmare.¹¹¹

Missing from this portrait of mayhem, of course, was where hundreds of other campaign participants lived and shared every day: the Hawthorne School, which had

¹⁰⁹ *Jet*, June 6, 13, 20, and 27, and July 4 and 11, 1968; *Afro-American*, May 18 and June 8 and 22, 1968; *Chicago Defender*, June 8-14 and 18, 1968; *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 8, 1968.

¹¹⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 1968.

¹¹¹ *Washington Post*, June 7-10, 1968; *Time*, June 28, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, June 10 and 16, 1968; Berry, “The anger and problems and sickness”; *U.S. News & World Report*, June 24, 1968; *New York Times*, June 24, 1968; Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon; and Kay Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles.

remained relatively tranquil and dry. As described in detail in Chapter Three and Six, it was in Hawthorne where representatives of ethnic Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, poor whites, African Americans, and American Indians had some of their most productive interactions, including the creation of a more permanent Poor People's Embassy after Resurrection City fell. According to those who stayed at Hawthorne, nothing could be more appropriate. Unlike journalists' almost dismissive depiction of the school as the segregated bunker of Reies Tijerina, Hawthorne offered a space where whites from Appalachia, ethnic Mexicans from the Southwest, African Americans from both east and west interacted, broke bread, danced, and devised protest strategy together. Wrote Mike Clark, an official with the Highlander Folk School and Hawthorne resident: "I consider the Hawthorne School as important as what took place in Resurrection City, mostly because it was a successful multi-ethnic community."¹¹² Yet the press – mainstream, black, and alternative – missed this angle entirely, as had most scholars since.

* * *

On June 24, the day SCLC's permit for the Mall ended, Ralph Abernathy vowed to stay, invoking the power granted him by campaign participant Chief George Crow Flies High. But government officials, National Guard members, and the police had another idea. Claiming that at least 100 assaults had occurred in the tent city since mid-May, the government made their move in the name of "law and order." After police flattened Resurrection City and then arrested Abernathy a few days later for unlawful assembly, the

¹¹² Mike Clark letter to Chuck Fager, "Resurrection City comments," 5, Box 105, Folder 12, HREC.

Washington phase of the campaign disintegrated. Although other activities stemming from the Washington campaign continued, the press – black and white – wrote the PPC’s obituary.¹¹³ Occasional stories still appeared, particularly when Abernathy led poor folks in marches outside the conventions and when congressional critics estimated that the PPC cost the government \$1.7 million in damages and law enforcement costs. But overall, members of the media began to turn their attention elsewhere, such as the upcoming national party conventions.¹¹⁴

Only a rare few journalists offered more thoughtful reflections on the campaign and the media’s role in its performance. Vincent Burke of the *Los Angeles Times* – not one of the campaign’s supporters generally – suggested on the eve of Solidarity Day that “historians of the future may render a more charitable verdict” on the campaign than journalists had. “The mere fact that the camp-in of the poor took place means that it can happen again,” Burke wrote – a threat he called legitimate enough for future presidents to consider opening lines of communications with the poor.¹¹⁵ Burke’s reasoning contained a subtle critique of the media’s campaign coverage, suggesting that the press did not always see the big picture. *New York Post* reporter Robert Terrell, writing for *Commonweal* magazine, was a bit more blunt. “One of the most tragic aspects of the Poor People’s Campaign is that it has consistently been distorted, misinterpreted and maligned by the news media,” argued Terrell.

¹¹³ *U.S. News & World Report*, July 8, 1968; *Atlanta Constitution*, June 25, 1968; *New York Times*, June 30, 1968; *Jet*, July 11, 1968; and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 11, 1968.

¹¹⁴ *U.S. News & World Report*, August 19, 1968; *New York Times*, July 15 and 17, 1968; and *Los Angeles Times*, August 6-7, 1968.

¹¹⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1968.

“Consequently, most Americans, particularly the white ones, have little or no concept of what the campaign is about or the problems that it has encountered. ... Poor people
goodbye: the press did you in.”¹¹⁶

That certainly was the conclusion of many members of the PPC staff, especially by early July. Echoing the complaints of Hosea Williams and Ralph Abernathy, campaign organizers believed that journalists had never given the campaign a real chance, instead focusing on the most negative aspects possible. In a scathing critique, Andrew Young argued that, “The press had apparently made up its mind to condemn the Poor People's Campaign and Resurrection City long before we even arrived in the capital.” For instance, “the Washington press corps saw no reason to understand food stamps or any other program that might help poor people,” he added. “Consequently the negative tone set by the press prevailed.”¹¹⁷

Tom Offenburger, as SCLC's lead press officer and a former member of the Washington press corps, was particularly insightful on the media's influence. “(T)he press, was and always is, ready to write a story about something they can see with their own eyes and don't have to interpret or understand much,” Offenburger said. “The Washington press corps ... is probably the most spoiled press corps in the world. Many of these reporters live on handouts. Also, many reporters have a kind of special professional allegiance to the Government departments or agencies or branch of Government that they cover.” Few of

¹¹⁶ *Commonweal*, July 12, 1968.

¹¹⁷ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 483-484.

them had covered the movement.¹¹⁸ Therefore, according to Offenburger, journalists were less interested in the “real substance of why we are here.”¹¹⁹ Instead, the focus remained on the supposed lack of goals, poor leadership, and the “convenient, colorful and interesting” nature of Resurrection City. Offenburger found especially irritating the mainstream media’s insistence that the campaign had not articulated goals, or at least publicized them:

My theory is simply that this controversy was invented by the press and by opponents of the Poor People's Campaign as something to hide behind, because I think the country is afraid to face the issues that we've been raising here. And the press has to write a story everyday and so they wrote about this day after day ... it was pure fiction and I think an invention by the press and by people opposed to the campaign.¹²⁰

For many marchers, press distortions left them embittered about their treatment by the press, as Offenburger’s words suggested.¹²¹

While Offenburger and others had a clear interest in shifting the blame away from their own leadership, they also acknowledged mistakes in their press relations. According to Offenburger, SCLC officials underestimated the size of their challenge in running a small city and that certain aspects of the campaign suffered because of it, such as offering the press consistent access to the shantytown and dealing with issues of crime inside the city. Perhaps more damaging was how PPC officials responded to criticism of the campaign and

¹¹⁸ According to researcher Ken Mann, most of the reporters covering Resurrection City did not have much experience covering either the movement or poor people. Correspondents assigned to the campaign included reporters who had covered the space program, Congress, Mexico City, and Indonesia. “Resurrection City and the Media,” Box 10, “TV: Media: Ken Mann,” AGP.

¹¹⁹ Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon.

¹²⁰ Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon.

¹²¹ See also John C. Rutherford, interview by Kay Shannon; and Kay Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles.

specifically Ralph Abernathy's leadership. The media obsession with the campaign's potential for disorder "was a problem because it began to direct how the staff was going to operate after the assassination," stated Kay Shannon, a white SCLC staff member during the campaign. "They were insecure, they didn't have a leader ... (and) it created a lack of communication."¹²² As a result, the organization made a concerted effort to "sell" Abernathy as SCLC's new leader to the media, to make it clear somebody was in control. This often meant pushing Abernathy to center stage, to the detriment of the campaign's supposed multiethnic leadership. This effort also translated into trying to control as much of the campaign's message as possible, by providing numerous news conferences, press releases through an extensive caravan reporting operation, and demands and remarks on paper beforehand, while managing press access to residents' homes in Resurrection City. To further control its message, SCLC also developed *Soul Force* as the organization's official newspaper.¹²³

Organizational allies had their own ideas about how PPC participants related to the media and they often contradicted the conclusions of SCLC. For instance, Donna Allen, an activist with Women Strike for Peace, argued that poor people should not try to seek out the media, but wait for them to approach. And "(w)hen they come, just tell them what you're talking about to each other, describe the class and workshop subjects, and describe how poor people have been cut out of the political life of the nation in the past and what it has

¹²² Quote by Kay Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles. Also, Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon.

¹²³ Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 499; Tom Offenburger, interview by Kay Shannon; and *Soul Force*, June 1968, Box 180, Folders 3 and 4, reel 28, frames 431-457, SCLC.

done to them,” she wrote. “Let the poor people do the talking. ... The only way to beat (the wealthy’s) control of and greater access to the media is to ignore it. After all, it’s what is done back home that really counts.”¹²⁴ SCLC did support and print an indigenous newspaper by Resurrection City residents called *True Unity News*. Featuring poems, basic news reports, and letters to the editor from inside the camp, the paper gave the poor a voice. But the short-lived newspaper also offered a potent voice to criticize management of the campaign – something PPC staffers did not want.¹²⁵

Overall, efforts to control the message, if anything, reinforced the mainstream media’s framing of the overall campaign. Such attempts may have made the situation even worse – by helping to encourage Reies Tijerina to launch his own renegade press conferences and demonstrations, allowing the Bayard Rustin incident to play out publicly, and placing a damper on marchers’ initial spontaneity and enthusiasm for protest. It also reaffirmed grassroots opinions of SCLC’s paternalistic nature. And although it was somewhat understandable, considering the pressures of the campaign, that PPC officials expressed extreme frustration with what they considered unfair media play, verbal explosions such as Hosea Williams’ proved to be unhelpful. If a perceived lack of direction, occasional harassment by city marshals, and poor weather did not sour reporters’ opinions of the campaign, then angrily being called “underground assassins” probably did. Thus, not only did the media frame the campaign narrowly, it also forced SCLC to do the same thing at times.

¹²⁴ *Southern Patriot*, June 1968.

¹²⁵ *True Unity News*, June 1968, Box 180, Folder 14, Reel 28, frames 558-583, SCLC.

* * *

It would be counterfactual to suggest that, if framed differently by the media, the Poor People's Campaign would have achieved all or most of its goals. Both correspondence to the Johnson White House and national polls demonstrated a nation deeply divided over SCLC's attempt to refocus the nation on the scourge of poverty.¹²⁶ Yet, more than any other institution, the media influenced what the American public read and saw during the development of the Poor People's Campaign, as well as what standards by which to judge it. The emphasis by the mainstream media – and to a lesser extent, the black press – on Resurrection City, conflict, violence, disorganization, and African American priorities painted a particular picture for readers. Rather than see the campaign as an attempt to shift from a race-based to a class-based framework, media frames strongly contributed to one particular interpretation: that the term “poor” was just another word for black, that the PPC was just another civil rights campaign, and thus part of a movement sullied by the perceived extremes of Black Power. Even the African American press, once a champion of civil rights, looked askance at much of the fiery rhetoric of economic justice.

¹²⁶ Letters and telegrams to the White House were overwhelmingly against the campaign until mid-June, when favorable notes outnumbered negative ones by a nearly 2-to-1 margin. In polls specifically about the campaign, Americans were against it by a large margin. But in less specific polls regarding poverty, the public proved generally favorable – for instance, 65 percent agreeing that poverty causes crime and 80 percent agreeing that “society bears a major responsibility for the plight of poor people.” “Harris Survey” on PPC in *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1968; “Weekly Mail Summaries,” May 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, June 7, 14, 21, 28, and July 5, 1968, in “12/29/67” folder, Box 13, WH5-1-1, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas; Harris Poll, June 1968, (<http://cgi.irss.unc.edu/tempdocs/20:04:14:2.htm>) and (<http://cgi.irss.unc.edu/tempdocs/20:08:21:3.htm>), accessed March 3, 2007.

Perhaps the American public – especially the white, liberal middle class that once supported the black freedom struggle – would have rejected a class-based movement as well. A bevy of evidence certainly exists to suggest a high level of callousness toward those poor people who do not sufficiently beg for a meager assistance. But the press successfully preempted the class rhetoric and values of the Poor People’s Campaign, and replaced them with its own set of language and images. That extraordinary power might explain why, after assailing journalists as “underground assassins” in his infamous press conference, Hosea Williams returned to shake their hands and cultivate these powerful interpreters of the day.¹²⁷ He knew who framed the movement.

¹²⁷ *Washington Post*, June 9, 1968.

Chapter Six

Lessons Learned, Contacts Made: Legacies and Making the 1970s

“Questions are being asked. Answers are being sought. Eyes and ears are opening in the home town because of what went on in Washington.”

- Phil Buskirk, of the American Friends Service Committee, in his PPC evaluation ¹

If the Poor People’s Campaign had achieved anything positive by the time Resurrection City fell, according to white Appalachian organizer Al McSurely, it was that “the idea and the actions” of a multiethnic coalition of the poor “caught our imaginations.”² To capitalize on this, a diverse mix of approximately fifteen activists gathered at the Hawthorne School on June 25, 1968, to devise a plan to keep the campaign’s multiethnic spirit alive. In what had become a regular sight during the campaign, representatives of the different ethnic groups sat side by side, this time to discuss what the future of their new multiethnic alliance might look like. Those present included American Indian activist Hank Adams, Reies López Tijerina and Wilfredo Sedillo of the Alianza, the Reverend Leo Nieto of the Texas Council of Churches, Mike Clark of the Highlander School, welfare rights organizer Dovie Thurman, SCLC’s Andrew Young, and black New Yorkers Frank Roberts

¹ Phil Buskirk memo to Barbara Moffett, August 12, 1968, CRD Folder 32556, “Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials, 1968,” AFSC.

² Al McSurely, “What Have We Done and What Should We Do?” n.d. [July 1968?], Box 32, Folder 5, RL.T.

and Cornelius Givens. What these original attendees determined was that America's poor needed its own "embassy" in Washington.³

Through nearly unanimous votes during two meetings in late June, the delegates laid out a basic structure for the new Poor People's Coalition, an organization in which the five primary ethnic groups stood on relatively equal ground. Tijerina described the new creation as "a national institution by the poor and for the poor," with a mission "to secure food, clothing and property, plus adequate education and honorable jobs for the poor, with no strings attached from any individual, corporation, or governmental organization."⁴ An interim leadership structure included a Supreme Council made up of five national spokesmen (Tijerina, Givens, Mad Bear Anderson, Grace Mora Newman, and Click Johnson), and a National Council of fifty, consisting of ten members from each ethnic group. Plans were then made to continue the conversation throughout the summer, with periodic meetings of the two councils, to establish firmer objectives, as well as conduct the more mundane work of forming an office and seeking reliable funding sources. Perhaps most striking was that, although SCLC's Young participated, it was clear that members of other organizations and ethnic groups – particularly ethnic Mexicans and white Appalachians – drove the conversation.⁵

³ Minutes of the Poor People's Organizing Convention, June 25 and 27, 1968, Box 20, Folder 31, RLT. Others listed as participating included Raymond Etheridge, Ted Wulpert, Manuel Holloway, and Dionice Paden.

⁴ Minutes of the Poor People's Organizing Convention, June 25 and 27, 1968, Box 20, Folder 31, RLT.

⁵ Minutes of the Poor People's Organizing Convention, June 25 and 27, 1968, Box 20, Folder 31, RLT; Andrew Young, interview by Nick Kotz, n.d., KOTZ; and *Washington Post*, July 2, 1968.

As McSurely suggested later in a memorandum to the “leaders of the Poor People’s Coalition,” there were organizing lessons to be learned from the campaign, especially in regard to timing and message. “We see the dangers in having the timing of a campaign dictated by the liberal establishment, instead of by the people and their proven leaders,” McSurely wrote, arguing that SCLC and the “rich liberals” that funded the organization were too preoccupied with affecting the presidential primaries and national party conventions. “Whenever you have the ‘leadership’ and the grassroots organizers working at cross purposes, you have ... chaos,” he stated. “[W]hile many of us were dedicated to working out a coalition, which takes time, planning and mutual experience, many others ... involved in the Campaign were dedicated to getting some heads beat on TV.” Therefore, a new organization’s actions should heed the poor’s experiences, take its time, and “not bite off more than we can chew,” an allusion to Resurrection City. In the end, “we must not depend on anyone but ourselves. To meet the needs of the poor in this country, we cannot rely on the consciences of the rich ... We can only depend on ourselves – and our organizational strength.” To McSurely and the others involved, the group’s diverse makeup of grassroots community leaders held that promise.⁶

During the next several months, a planning committee of activists met in Washington and at the Airlie House in Virginia to develop further the coalition’s purpose and structure – with the end result demonstrating how difficult it was to avoid entanglement with the liberal establishment. What emerged was less a poor person’s congressional

⁶ McSurely, “What Have We Done and What Should We Do?” n.d. [July 1968?], Box 32, Folder 5, RLT.

lobbying group than a clearinghouse designed to provide informational, networking, and strategic support to local community groups interested in class-based, multiethnic alliances at home. In a funding proposal to the Ford Foundation – a symbol of that very establishment – the Poor People’s Embassy proposed creating national demonstration programs to break down “several fundamental barriers” that “still continue to hamper successful coordination and cooperation between minority and poverty groups,” including a lack of “sufficient intergroup knowledge as to who constitutes minority leadership, ... adequate dialogue between minority leadership on both primary and secondary levels, ... necessary experience and understanding between minority group leadership, resulting in less than adequate concern among the various minority groups for the culture, values and traditions of other groups,” and “ ... specific information regarding the types of programs that various minority groups have operating in their regions.” Programs would consist of workshops, seminars, and research projects designed to “create new program development techniques, minority tactics for social change, community action research methodologies, new program funding techniques,” as well as to “re-educate” the middle class in “techniques for the resolution of intergroup conflicts and value confrontations.”⁷ In proposing an initiative rooted in educational seminars funded by a liberal foundation, the plan relied heavily on the middle class presumptions so often criticized by activists such as McSurely. Yet for those who

⁷ “Proposal Draft for Developing National Cooperation and Communication Among Minority Group Leadership,” undated [September 1968?], Box 31, Folder 20, RLT.

eventually wrote the grant proposal, it represented an intellectual rationale with which foundation decision-makers might be comfortable and on which activists could later build.⁸

The concept still proved too potentially radical for liberal foundations in retreat from 1960s radicalism – a tough blow activists found difficult to overcome. Nita Jo Gonzales, eldest daughter of Corky, served as a representative of the Crusade for Justice and recalled both clarity of mission and finances as major challenges. “We weren’t taken very seriously” by the media and foundations, and thus, money remained a constant struggle. One cost-cutting measure moved the embassy to New York City, where it operated out of Puerto Rican organizer Anibol Sullivan’s house – a move Gonzales considered a mistake in retrospect because it moved the fledgling organization away from Washington. Yet the Poor People’s Embassy, even in its weaker iteration, still fostered an interethnic dialogue among young activists for a few years, mostly through periodic meetings and correspondence. Gonzales remained part of the staff for a year and a half before returning to Denver to work with her father at the Crusade for Justice and its own “freedom school,” Escuela Tlatelolco. Others, such as Cornelius “Cornbread” Givens, used the embassy as a foundation to launch small non-profit organizations such as the Poor People’s Development Corporation (PPDC) in New Jersey and Highlander West in New Mexico. PPDC, which worked on establishing farm cooperatives in the South and linked them to Northern consumers, boasted a uniquely

⁸ According to Reies Tijerina, the PPE planning committee had already received an initial \$20,000 in grant money. Alianza press release, July 20, 1968, Box 31, Folder 28, RLT. See also minutes of Poor People’s Coalition, July 17, 1968, Box 31, Folder 24, RLT; and Roger Wilkins memo to Ramsey Clark, undated [late 1968?], Box 73, “Poor People’s Campaign – Arrest Statistics” folder, Ramsey Clark papers, LBJ.

diverse board of PPC veterans, such as Tijerina, Tillie Walker, and Black Panther Mark Comfort, and longtime civil rights activists such as former SNCC founder Bob Zellner.⁹

Recent scholarship has begun to complicate our understanding of the Black Power movement and its influence on grassroots organizing into the 1970s.¹⁰ But scholars have been slow to explore the parallel and sometimes overlapping attempts of the late 1960s to build multiethnic alliances, including several efforts stemming from or bolstered by the Poor People's Campaign.¹¹ Although Resurrection City's collapse and Ralph Abernathy's arrest for unlawful assembly on U.S. Capitol grounds signaled the winding down of one phase of the PPC, many participants ignored the media's declaration that it was over and stalwartly sought to maintain the spirit of the campaign. Through continued demonstrations, coalitions such as the Poor People's Embassy, and more disparate efforts in their own communities, marchers perpetuated the campaign's lofty rhetoric and ideals. During the next few years, many activities could be traced back to those days in Washington.

⁹ Nita Jo Gonzales, interview by author; Mark Comfort, interview by Robert Wright; Nina Ryan, administrative assistant to Marian Wright, letter to Anibol Solivan, October 9, 1968, PPE staff letter to "Board members and friends," April 22, 1969, and PPDF brochure, 1973, all in Box 31, Folder 24, and PPDF inaugural report, 1974, Box 31, Folder 25, all in RLT.

¹⁰ For instance, see Countryman, *Up South*; Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name*; Komozi Woodard, "A Message From the Grassroots: The Black Power Experiment in Newark, New Jersey," and Reynaldo Anderson, "Practical Internationalists: The Story of the Black Panther Party in Des Moines, Iowa," in *Groundwork*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 77-96 and 282-299; and Rhonda Y. Williams, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power" in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 79-104.

¹¹ For interethnic organizing, see Ogbar, *Black Power*, Chapter 4, and "Brown Power to Brown People: Radical Ethnic Nationalism, the Black Panthers, and Latino Radicalism, 1967-1973," in *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Lazerow and Williams, 252-286; Jon Rice, "The World of the Illinois Panthers" in *Freedom North*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 41-64; and Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left*. None, however, make more than a passing mention of the Poor People's Campaign.

Paradoxically, these legacies ranged from genuinely class-based efforts to ones that can only be described as intra-ethnic identity politics.

Chicano activists built upon the contacts they made with each other, and with white, Puerto Rican, and American Indian organizers, to bring on or strengthen some of their movement's greatest achievements. Uneven interethnic efforts in cities such as Chicago and Denver demonstrated both the promise and limits of such organizing. Although maligned by the media, weakened financially, and plagued by paternalism, even the Southern Christian Leadership Conference found silver linings in the Washington campaign – ones which the organization exploited in places such as Charleston, South Carolina. In short, a study of the years after the Washington campaign suggest that the national, multiethnic conversation on poverty sought by Martin Luther King Jr. did not end amid the mud, sweat, and tears of Resurrection City. That conversation, including an acknowledgement of the hard lessons learned from the campaign's shortcomings, continued in many forms in a variety of places. These sustained interactions represent not only the subtleties and significance of the PPC, but also the countervailing forces that helped shape the 1970s.

* * *

Although many journalists, politicians, and even SCLC officials let out a huge sigh of relief when police flattened Resurrection City, the shantytown's swift demise did not mean the immediate end of the campaign's Washington phase. Rather, many PPC participants interpreted it as the beginning of a new militant chapter of the campaign. Just hours after the city's evacuation, Ralph Abernathy had led several hundred protesters to the Capitol grounds, where police arrested more than 300 for unlawful assembly. Many marchers

appeared itching for a fight. “I don’t care whether we are arrested – I’m from Selma,” declared Leona Jackson, while others murmured more menacingly that this might be their last nonviolent march.¹² Trying to emulate his predecessor’s famous letter from Birmingham, Abernathy implored supporters of the campaign to continue their protests and spark arrests through his “Letter from a D.C. Jail” and then a César Chávez-style fast. Abernathy’s aides echoed his call for action, as did the “Young Turks” of the NAACP who challenged the old guard to “pack and go to Washington” during that organization’s annual convention.¹³ In addition, Jesse Jackson and James Bevel held rallies around the city, announcing that economic boycotts would begin in downtown Washington and other cities in less than a week. It seemed that Resurrection City’s closing had given the campaign a new lease on life.¹⁴

While some participants sought a way home, up to a thousand marchers and others in town heard the call for action. Many former residents of Resurrection City found new places to stay, including in several area churches and the Hawthorne School, whose director had refused to comply with city demands to evict that institution’s temporary residents. Dozens of protests and subsequent arrests took place during the next several weeks, including a 600-plus-person circle around the Capitol, a Quaker Action Group vigil, a “protest picnic” on the grounds of the Capitol, a 125-person hunger strike in a Virginia jail,

¹² *Washington Post*, June 25, 1968.

¹³ *Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1968.

¹⁴ *Washington Post*, June 25-26 and 28, 1968; *New York Times*, June 27 and 30, 1968; and Berry, “The anger and problems and sickness.”

and many others, often led or dominated by clergy and Quaker activists. Simultaneously, sympathizers of the campaign set up mini-versions of Resurrection City in other parts of the country. For instance, in Virginia, a few dozen people calling themselves the “Refugees of Resurrection City, USA” sought a new place to encamp, hold workshops, and build the movement. Eventually settling on ten acres of land provided by civil rights veteran Amelia Boynton in rural Alabama, the group intended to “build a city of love, freedom, equality, peace and justice for all people. This was Dr. King’s dream.”¹⁵ Other PPC supporters considered tent cities in St. Louis, Chicago, and elsewhere, although there is no evidence that they occurred.¹⁶

One tent city that did rise was in Washington state, where a few dozen American Indians and their allies pitched tents on the grounds of the state capital in Olympia. Dubbed “Resurrection City II” by PPC veteran and Tulalip tribe leader Janet McCloud, the camp was set up to protest the violation of treaty and fishing rights, as well as the jailing of Dick Gregory, comedian and civil rights activist for both African Americans and Indians. Symbolizing Indians’ claim to much of Washington state under the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854, the camp took on many of the characteristics of its namesake, including membership identity bands, internal security guards, and an outpouring of assistance from the public. Activists launched demonstrations from the camp – in this case, fish-ins, to protest the federal government’s refusal to honor a treaty allowing Nisqually natives to fish

¹⁵ “History of Refugees of Resurrection City, U.S.A. for Human Rights,” Box 33, Folder 1, WILEY.

¹⁶ *Washington Post*, June 27-30 and July 1, 3-8, 1968; *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 17, 1968; “History of Refugees of Resurrection City, U.S.A. for Human Rights,” Box 33, Folder 1, WILEY; and FBI internal memos, Richmond, Virginia, July 19, 1968, and St. Louis, July 31, 1968.

nearby streams and ponds. Supported by members of the Students for a Democratic Society, the Peace and Freedom Party, and the Black Panthers, Indians including Hank Adams and Suzette Bridges protested for more than three months, sparking arrests and publicity before reaching a compromise with state officials. Resurrection City II played a role, but just like in the D.C. campaign, authorities knocked it down.¹⁷

By mid-July, it became clear that SCLC's resources had been depleted during the Washington campaign and that a mass wave of economic boycotts in forty cities would not materialize, despite the energy of hundreds of diehard activists and even members of the SCLC rank and file.¹⁸ Activists would have to organize themselves without SCLC, which had exhausted much of its resources. Instead, Abernathy turned his attention to smaller protests outside the summer's two national party conventions. King earlier had hinted at such a choice if the PPC stumbled, since affecting the policy debate of the year's presidential race always had been a primary objective of the campaign.¹⁹

Salvaging probably the most effective symbol of the Poor People's Campaign in the Mule Train, Abernathy and dozens of representatives took their cause to Miami Beach and Chicago to remind the delegates that the nation's poor would not go away. They had only limited success. Abernathy spoke with the Republican Party Platform Committee, which

¹⁷ *People's World*, June 29, 1968; *Daily World*, July 14, August 17, September 10 and 17, and October 29, 1968; and press release, June 20, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT.

¹⁸ It remains striking that, despite the strain the campaign placed on staffers, most of those interviewed for the Civil Rights Documentation Project in the summer of 1968 remained quite enthusiastic about the ongoing struggle. For example, see Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; Kay Shannon, interview by Claudia Rawles; and Cornelius Givens, interview by Kay Shannon, July 7, 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

¹⁹ Yglesias, "It may be a long, hot spring in the capital"; and *New York Times*, July 15, 1968.

politely listened to his request for jobs, welfare, health care, and income maintenance; he did not mention land and treaty rights. Later, during the convention, he called for calm as a civil disorder engulfed part of Miami's Liberty City neighborhood. But although at least one editor credited the Washington experience as "valuable to the campaign's leadership" because SCLC had reverted to standard channels of influence, journalists and delegates alike generally treated the poor as nothing more than a minor sideshow to the party's nomination of Richard Nixon.²⁰ The actual poor people from Marks, Mississippi, received no attention, and in Nixon's acceptance speech, the Vietnam War and "law and order" dwarfed any talk of serious federal prescriptions for addressing poverty.²¹

Much of the same occurred in Chicago, where Democrats nominated Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the party's presidential nominee. But, unlike in Miami, a different kind of riot exploded in the streets, as Chicago police officers pummeled mostly young, white anti-war protesters on national television. Abernathy and the Mule Train unwittingly played a role as the marchers who had been wandering rather aimlessly around Chicago's downtown loop, suddenly packed in behind the wagons on Michigan Avenue and prepared to descend on the convention hall together. Instead, the police delayed the crowd, cut off the marchers from the Mule Train by allowing the latter to pass, and then attacked the crowd of protesters with a ferociousness rarely caught on camera. Norman Mailer captured the

²⁰ *New York Times*, July 24, 1968.

²¹ *New York Times*, August 1, 7-9, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, August 6-8 and 11, 1968; and Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Primus, 1968), 51, 54-55.

scene beautifully, especially the utter helplessness demonstrated by the mules – and for that matter, Abernathy:

The mules had not moved through the entire fray. Isolated from the battle, they had stood there in harness waiting to be told to go on. Only in a while did they turn their heads. Their role as actors in the Poor People’s March was to wait and to serve. Finally they moved on. The night had come. It was dark. The intersection was empty. Shoes, ladies’ handbags, and pieces of clothing lay on the street outside the hotel.²²

It would be the images of the Chicago streets – the brutality of the police, the strange frivolity of the anti-war protesters, the irrelevance of the mules – that came to symbolize so powerfully the displacement of anti-poverty politics with that of law and order at the national level. Two months later, a plurality of voters chose a political icon of the 1950s – ironically, Richard Nixon – in hopes of restoring public trust in government to protect the so-called “silent majority” of Americans.²³

* * *

While presidential politics seemed to harden against grand solutions to fight poverty, many PPC participants returned to their communities in the summer of 1968. But they did not forget the lessons they learned in Washington or the new friends they had made. This was certainly the case for the hundreds of ethnic Mexican activists involved. While his daughter stayed behind to work on the Poor People’s Embassy, Corky Gonzales returned to

²² Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, 173-174.

²³ *New York Times*, August 27, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1968; *Chicago Defender*, August 31-September 6, 1968; Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, 51, 54-55, 168-169, 173; Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 319-334; and James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 694-697. See also David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Denver to pick up where he and members of the Crusade for Justice had left off in their struggle against white supremacy. But he did not return empty-handed. Rather, Gonzales could count many more friends and followers after the campaign – a key accomplishment of the Crusade’s participation in the PPC. Some scholars of the Chicano movement have credited the campaign with raising national consciousness of the ethnic Mexican struggle.²⁴ But because the press routinely ignored Chicanos during the PPC, Gonzales’ family and others who attended believed that the campaign’s legacy was more nuanced. “For me, more critically, was that SCLC knew about us now, that the Puerto Ricans knew about us now, and it allowed for those alliances at times on issues [that] ... before we didn’t have,” said Nita Gonzales. Her brother, Rudy, added that although the Crusade did not maintain close relations with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, it did foster important connections with activists from other organizations. He recalled his father regularly communicating with Stokely Carmichael, Father James Groppi, and Hank Adams, for example.²⁵

The Crusade’s new headquarters became a mecca for radical organizers, several of whom came to Denver to share their experiences with the organization and the larger ethnic Mexican community. Groppi, a former advisor to the NAACP Youth Council in Milwaukee, visited Denver a few times to discuss the marches he helped orchestrate for open housing and then welfare rights. In one visit in early 1969, he reminded his audience

²⁴ See Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 63; Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization*, 40; and Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, 178.

²⁵ Gerry Gonzales, Rudy Gonzales, Nita Gonzales, and Ernesto Vigil, interviews by author.

of 500 that, “Christ was a revolutionist and was put to death because he dared to confront the system.”²⁶ Soon after, Suzette Bridges and Roxanne Allen, American Indian activists from Washington state, visited the Crusade to discuss fishing rights. Other Indian activists soon followed, including Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt, who founded the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Minneapolis in late 1968.²⁷

Despite these new friends, Gonzales did not forget what he announced before the Crusade joined the caravan to Washington: that the real work of building bases of power would remain when they returned. Certainly, his high-profile pronouncements in Washington helped contribute to his credibility among ethnic Mexicans at home, by demonstrating both a willingness and courage to take on some of the most powerful officials in the nation. His angry but articulate tongue-lashing of Attorney General Ramsey Clark on criminal justice issues garnered some attention in the local press – as did *El Plan del Barrio*, a five-point program for the Chicano movement that he unveiled at the Solidarity Day rally. Called by scholars and activists as one of the most articulate summations of the movement’s policy objectives, the plan called for housing reflective of communal and family living; a genuinely free public education in which Spanish and Mexican culture and history are respected; seed money to develop community-based businesses, industries, and co-ops; a return of ancestral lands, with Spanish-style taxation policy; and non-discriminatory unions, training, and placement programs. But as King and PPC organizers were reminded when

²⁶ *El Gallo*, March 1969.

²⁷ *El Gallo*, March 1969; Gerry Gonzales, Rudy Gonzales, Nita Gonzales, and Ernesto Vigil, interviews by author; 1969 and 1970 travel planners, Box 14, Folder 11, JGP; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 202.

they struggled to put together the campaign initially, the real challenge was matching rhetoric with action.²⁸

Upon returning to Denver, Crusade members again took a lead role in protesting discrimination, poverty, and police brutality in the city. Nearly a hundred Crusade members joined the picket line to support striking National Florist Workers Organization workers. They led demonstrations against the city over a police officer's shooting death of a 15-year-old ethnic Mexican and called for an independent investigation and the officer's firing. And the organization began to transition to a larger headquarters building more centrally located in Denver's ethnic Mexican community. Despite their differences with Lauren Watson during the campaign, Gonzales and the Crusade also continued to reach out to those Gonzales viewed as most dedicated to grassroots direct action, including the local Black Panther chapter. For example, as part of the police shooting protests, Gonzales demanded that a similar incident involving a 19-year-old African American also be investigated, and during the March 1969 school walkouts, scores of black students and the Panthers showed their solidarity by walking out as well.²⁹

The campaign also helped facilitate the creation of new alliances locally. According to Nita Gonzales, her father began to form more concrete bonds with American Indian activists in town. Before 1968, Corky Gonzales knew some of the local Indian activists

²⁸ *Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News*, June 4 and 20, 1968; *La Raza*, July 10, 1968; *Washington Post*, June 4, 1968; Gómez-Quíñones, *Chicano Politics*, 114; and Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization*, 39-40.

²⁹ *El Gallo*, July 1968; *Daily World*, March 28, 1969; *Denver Post*, March 21-25, 1969; *El Grito del Norte*, October 5, 1968; Nita Gonzales, Lauren Watson, and Ernesto Vigil, interviews by author; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 68.

casually and had started to embrace an indigenous component to his Chicano identity in the abstract. But it was not until after returning from Washington that he actively sought American Indians as political allies. During the PPC, he worked with American Indian activists more than he ever had before, and returned impressed with men such as Mad Bear Anderson, a Tuscarora. These experiences encouraged him and others in the Crusade to develop both personal and political relationships with the city's American Indian leadership. *El Gallo*, the Crusade's newspaper, began carrying news of Indian activism.

Acknowledgements of "red power" crept into Gonzales' rhetoric, while the Crusade's Ernesto Vigil married Jessica Bordeaux. Later that year, the Bordeauxes helped Vernon Bellecourt, Clyde's brother, found the local AIM chapter, strengthening the Crusade's bond with AIM activists across the country. Clearly, the Crusade had placed itself in a position of strength by cultivating relationships with other ethnic groups in the community, a process enhanced by its members' experience in Washington, D.C.³⁰

Yet Corky Gonzales also recognized that, as important as such alliances were, it was essential to organize themselves as Chicanos first. Ironically, this recognition was perhaps the most important lesson activists such as Gonzales drew from the Poor People's Campaign: that Chicano strength relied on a certain level of ethnic unity and that although poverty and oppression were shared by many people, blacks, ethnic Mexicans, and Indians constructed their solutions to poverty differently. Ethnically and racially driven culture, such as the importance of land symbolized by Aztlán, resulted in dissimilar but not necessarily

³⁰ Nita Gonzales, Ernesto Vigil, and Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, interviews by author; *El Gallo*, December 1968 and June 1970; Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 68; and Acuña, *Occupied America*, 356.

competing needs. In a speech at Arizona State University, he crystallized this position in not just a domestic, but also an international, context:

The white radical says it is a class struggle, and we say, that's fine! The Chicano comes along and tells me it's only a class struggle. I tell him no, it's just an ass struggle. You want to justify that you are with a radical white broad. ... [W]e want to say that it is a class struggle, but with the class struggle, the Black agrees that it is also a racist struggle. ... As I told many young radicals five or six years ago, and I tell Blacks today, with whom we are friendly and have mutual respect, that until they are organized and they are doing their thing, and until we are organized, there will be no international coalition. There will be no international coalition until we have made Aztlán a reality and the Chicano has become a concentrated organized force.³¹

Thus, after settling into their new building, the former Cavalry Baptist Church on Downing Street, Gonzales returned to his idea of a regional event for Chicano students and began in earnest to organize the first Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, to be held in the spring of 1969 in Denver.³²

Undoubtedly, the Crusade would have held a youth conference in 1969 whether or not Gonzales attended the PPC. Yet for some activists, the difference between going and not going was their personal interactions with Corky Gonzales, as well as other Chicano youth. For participants such as Carlos Montes, Ralph Ramirez, and Lorraine Escalante, spending a month or more with the Chicano leader and his family in the Hawthorne School

³¹ Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, "Arizona State University Speech," October 14, 1970, in *Message to Aztlán*, ed. Esquibel, 36-37, 55. The use of "international" suggests several influences on Gonzales' thinking, including the internationalist rhetoric of the Black Panthers and his identification with those suffering during the Vietnam War and under the brutal U.S. government-backed military dictatorship in Mexico. The Crusade's "freedom school," Escuela Tlatelolco was named after the October 2, 1968, massacre in which soldiers killed hundreds of protesting Mexican students in preparation to host the Summer Olympics. Elena Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico* (New York: Viking Press, 1975). See also Ogbar, *Black Power*, Chapter Six.

³² Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 68. See also "Corky on Unity," *El Grito del Norte*, May 19, 1969.

strongly persuaded them to respond to his call. “The fact that we knew Corky and Ernesto Vigil real well, as soon as they told (us), we were there,” Montes recalled. “It was no question of that.”³³ Escalante also found herself in Denver with her activist mother, Alicia, who had settled in Denver for a time after meeting Corky Gonzales in Washington. Others, such as Maria Varela and Gloria Arellanes, saw the youth conference as a natural extension of the relationships they made in Washington. For “[t]he young people, there was a lot of impact,” Varela said. “Again, many of them had never traveled. Here they were in Washington, D.C. Here, they were meeting people from other places. The kids from the Crusade hung with the guys from New Mexico.”³⁴ Naturally, the conference was an opportunity to see their friends again, and in many ways, “‘conference’ is a poor word to describe those five days,” said Varela. “... In reality it was a fiesta: days of celebrating what sings in the blood of people who, taught to believe they’re ugly, discover the true beauty in their souls.”³⁵

The conference also proved to be a key turning point in the rhetoric and direction of the student movement and Corky Gonzales’ role within it. The roughly 1,500 participants – a number that far surpassed the Crusade’s expectations – embraced what one scholar calls a “foundational blueprint for the Chicano movement.”³⁶ El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán, a document compiling the many resolutions passed during the five-day conference, trumpeted

³³ Carlos Montes, interview by author.

³⁴ Maria Varela, interview by author.

³⁵ Quote in *El Grito del Norte*, April 14, 1969, in Box 68, RLT. Also, Maria Varela, Alicia Escalante, Carlos Montes, Ralph Ramirez, Ernesto Vigil, and Gloria Arellanes, interviews by author.

³⁶ Oropeza, *¡Raza Si, Guerra No!*, 86.

Chicano self-determination, ethnic pride and unity, and an emphasis on cultural values of “life, family, and home,” in contrast to alleged societal values of hyper-individualistic materialism and whiteness. Declaring themselves free of persistent feelings of inferiority, conference participants “publicly and proudly linked their political crusade to their cultural inheritance” by declaring, among other things, that “brown was beautiful.”³⁷ This rhetoric did not come without controversy, even within the conference, as Puerto Ricans from New York and Chicago expressed concern over the extent of the statement’s inclusion. Were other Spanish-speaking people included? One Young Lord from Chicago also questioned “this intellectual talk ... I’m used to street talk ... As far as I’m concerned we’re the people that are really ready for the revolution.”³⁸ Yet despite being criticized as both naïve and divisive, this nationalist turn – best articulated during the first Denver conference – remained central to the Chicano movement into the mid-1970s.³⁹

For the Crusade, Corky Gonzales, and the Brown Berets, the 1969 conference’s achievements cemented their roles as leaders of the Chicano movement and their relationships with each other. Into the 1970s, the Crusade hosted another national youth conference while Gonzales became one of the most sought-after speakers in the Chicano circuit and a contender to chair La Raza Unida, an ethnic Mexican party in the Southwest. The Crusade also continued to take a lead on issues of civil rights, education, and economic

³⁷ Oropeza, *¡Raza Si, Guerra No!*, 87.

³⁸ *People’s World*, May 3, 1969.

³⁹ “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” 1969, in *Testimonio*, ed. Rosales, 361-363; *El Grito del Norte*, April 14 and May 19, 1969, in Box 68, RLT; Muñoz Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power*, 75-78; Oropeza, *¡Raza Si, Guerra No!*, 85-88; Gómez-Quñones, *Chicano Politics*, 123-124; and Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 95-100.

and social justice in Denver, including the establishment of Escuela Tlatelolco, a freedom school for Chicanos. The Brown Berets went home as well to sustain their cultural survival programs, including the Fairfax Free Clinic, and serve as models for student activists across the country. Becoming increasingly involved in the anti-war movement, the Berets helped establish the Chicano Moratorium Committee, which sponsored the August 29, 1970, rally-turned-riot that scholars and activists routinely see as the peak of the Chicano movement.⁴⁰ The Berets also spawned a distinctly Chicana nationalism, articulated by women, such as Gloria Arellanes, tired of their marginalization in the movement.⁴¹

Other ethnic Mexican activists also built upon their PPC experiences in different ways in the days and months after they went home. Many recalled returning or seeing their friends return from the campaign “a little more militant ... a little more energetic.”⁴² José Angel Gutiérrez, who did not make it to Washington, remembered the excitement of his fellow members of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) in Texas: “They came back euphoric. It was kind of like more medals from struggles ... Everybody had a story to tell, of how they got beat, or how they got ‘maced’. ... Everybody had war stories.”⁴³ Such stories often translated into useful tools to recruit other Chicano youth, an appeal to

⁴⁰ The anti-war march and rally attracted approximately 20,000 Chicano activists and their supporters to East Los Angeles. Police responded to a small dispute near Laguna Park, which erupted into a full-blown riot. Three died, including *Los Angeles Times* columnist Ruben Salazar. See Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!*, Chapter 3.

⁴¹ Nita Jo Gonzales, Ernesto Vigil, Juanita Malouff-Dominguez, Gloria Arellanes, Ralph Ramirez, and Carlos Montes, interviews by author; *El Gallo*, June 1970; Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!*, 55; and Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, Chapter Six.

⁴² Roque Garcia, interview by author.

⁴³ José Angel Gutiérrez, interview by author.

male activists' masculinity and to everyone's outrage. Youth fresh from the campaign, such as Andres Valdez, attempted to emulate people and groups they encountered at the Hawthorne School or Resurrection City. For Valdez, the tough, nationalistic rhetoric of the San José-based Black Berets attracted him enough to found the organization's first Colorado chapter.⁴⁴

Chicanos left Washington impressed with the Brown Berets as well. One such individual was Gilberto Ballejos, an Alianza member who started the underground newspaper *El Papel* in 1967 and became a PPC organizer in New Mexico. After interacting and living with Brown Berets in Washington, Ballejos returned to New Mexico inspired to form an Albuquerque chapter of the Brown Berets. The result was the development of a dynamic local organization at the same time as Reies Tijerina's influence began to wane. In August 1968, the Brown Berets mobilized hundreds of ethnic Mexicans to protest the police shooting death of a young ethnic Mexican and to seek a civilian review board with substantial minority representation. Despite membership fluctuations and internal differences over leadership, the new organization remained a presence in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and other parts of northern New Mexico during the next few years. Often joining forces with the Alianza and groups such as the Comancheros, a Tierra Amarilla-based youth organization, the Albuquerque Berets led direct action protests and called for stronger state

⁴⁴ Vigil, *Crusade for Justice*, 71.

minimum wage laws, school community control boards, bilingual education, respectful welfare regulations, and reforms of New Mexico's corporation tax laws.⁴⁵

Albuquerque's Brown Berets also helped foster interethnic organizing, routinely cooperating with African Americans and American Indians in protest and political strategy. In October 1968, Brown Berets joined students in criticizing what they deemed to be race-based firings at a Santa Fe high school. Working with the Black Student Union and the United Mexican American Students at the University of New Mexico (UNM), the Berets later protested the school administration's whites-only definition of "community leaders" and its relationship with all-white Brigham Young University. Ballejos helped organize a citizens grievance committee to assist university workers in fighting low wages and discrimination, and ran on a school board reform ticket with Shirley Hill Witt, a Mohawk and founder of the National Indian Youth Council. In *El Papel*, Ballejos declared that the UNM-BYU demonstration was a "new day for black-brown cooperation."⁴⁶ Although perhaps overstating this "new day," Ballejos interestingly pointed out that mainstream news outlets characterized the demonstration as solely a black protest – a media tendency that he had noticed while in Washington and was determined to combat. The *Albuquerque Journal* "realized the significance of the Black-Chicano coalition and tried to suppress it through a process of selective omission," wrote Ballejos. "The contents of the accompanying article

⁴⁵ SAC-Albuquerque to FBI Director, August 21, 1968; SAC-WFO to FBI Director, September 13, 1968; *Albuquerque Tribune*, August 20 and October 22, 1968; *El Grito del Norte*, August 24, September 15, and December 18, 1968, all in Box 68, RLT; *Albuquerque Journal*, November 18, 1968; and Gilberto Ballejos, interview by author.

⁴⁶ *El Papel*, March 1969.

stated that Blacks and ‘a few sympathizers’ were present in the protest, thus omitting the significance of the new coalition between Blacks and Chicanos.”⁴⁷ Thus, through *El Papel* – and its sister newspaper in Española, *El Grito del Norte*, edited by SNCC veteran Betita Martinez – the Berets and their close associates reinforced interethnic activism by simply acknowledging it.⁴⁸

For other organizers, the Poor People’s Campaign not only energized them, but it also precipitated a wholly different direction of activism. This was the experience of Miguel Bárragan, a Roman Catholic priest hired as a field representative of the Bishop’s Committee on the Spanish-Speaking in San Antonio. “I had to make a choice,” he recalled. “I was given the choice of staying within the Catholic Church or (the) Poor People’s Campaign. I called the PPC a moral issue. We all had to get involved and do our thing.”⁴⁹ Bárragan, praised by SCLC officials for organizing a contingent from central Texas to come to Washington on almost no money, had worked for the committee for less than a year when the campaign came to his attention. He believed that he would have left the church eventually, because of what he saw as a lack of commitment to inter-ecumenical efforts and genuine programming to empower individuals: “It wasn’t going anywhere, man. I’m not into services,” he recalled. But the campaign was “my opportunity to grow, my opportunity

⁴⁷ *El Papel*, March 1969.

⁴⁸ SAC-Albuquerque confidential memo, April 30, 1969, including copy of *Albuquerque News*, March 6, 1969; *Albuquerque Journal*, August 29, 1968; *El Grito del Norte*, September 15, 1968, January 11 and 29, and May 19, 1969; *El Papel*, March 1969 and October-November 1969; and Elizabeth “Betita” Martinez, “A View From New Mexico: Recollections of the Movimiento Left,” *Monthly Review* 54 (July-August 2002), <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0702martinez.htm>, accessed July 23, 2007.

⁴⁹ Miguel Bárragan, interview by author.

to possible resources, my opportunity to make my voice heard as to the type of legislation we needed. ... I had to grow. I'm not a social worker."⁵⁰ He resigned his church post, went to Washington, lived in the Hawthorne School, which he called "a blessing," and wrote songs, some of which became quasi-anthems for the Chicano movement, including "Mujeres Valientes" about striking Chicana farm workers. Indeed, Bárragan's most important cross-cultural exchanges were probably with a guitar in his hands. From sharing a stage with Guy Carawan and Bob Seeger in Resurrection City to smaller venues such as the Hawthorne School's common room, Bárragan found a way to promote solidarity while he pursued his new calling.⁵¹

Not unlike his Chicano brethren, Bárragan also met a variety of people as part of the campaign. One of the most significant individuals he met, however, was not another ethnic Mexican, but white actor Marlon Brando. The star of *On the Waterfront* had played a role in the early fish-ins in Washington state and later had promised to devote his career to the civil rights cause. The latter proved short-lived, but he did contribute to the campaign, appearing in New Mexico for the caravan and wowing the crowd including PPC organizer Shirley Hill Witt. He also donated \$70,000 to the cause – \$20,000 of which went to Bárragan's efforts in Texas. With this seed money in the spring of 1968, Bárragan and MAYO co-founder Nacho Perez established an office in Laredo to organize conferences in preparation for the

⁵⁰ Miguel Bárragan, interview by author.

⁵¹ Miguel Bárragan, interview by author; *San Antonio Express/News*, May 14 and 19, 1968; *Alamo Messenger*, May 10, 1968; and *National Register*, May 12, 1968; Luís Diaz de León, interview by José Angel Gutiérrez; San Antonio field office memo to FBI Director, May 16 and 21, 1968; and Juan A. Sepulveda Jr., *The Life and Times of Willie Velasquez: Su Voto es Su Voz* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2003), 66-67.

campaign, as well as to write proposals for larger foundation grants. These efforts initially produced several buses of support for the PPC as well as the arresting image of hundreds of poor protesters marching around the “sacred” Alamo in San Antonio.⁵²

But Brando’s PPC money also helped jump-start the fledgling Southwest Council of La Raza (SWCLR), recalled B arragan, who became the council’s first executive director. In the first of many grants, the Ford Foundation provided the council \$630,000 in June 1968. Although smeared as a communist front, the SWCLR was a community development organization designed to provide funding and training support for local projects in ethnic Mexican communities. In Phoenix, SWCLR helped fund Chicanos Por La Causa, made up of Arizona State University students and other activists interested in “obtaining resources to confront the educational, economic, youth, and housing problems of the Chicano community.”⁵³ Most notable was the council’s support for the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF), founded in 1967, as well as the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project (SVREP) in 1974, both of which provided ethnic Mexicans with valuable legal and electoral tools to expand their influence under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. By the 1980s, the council – by then named the National Council of La Raza – had become “the premier civil rights advocacy organization for Chicanos and other Latinos” in the country, according to Jos e Angel Guti errez.⁵⁴

⁵² Miguel B arragan, interview by author; *Jet*, May 16, 1968; *San Antonio Express/News*, May 19, 1968; and San Antonio SAC to FBI Director, May 16 and 18, 1968.

⁵³ Anonymous, “Chicanos Por La Causa,” 1971, in *Testimonio*, ed. Rosales, 379-380.

⁵⁴ Quote in Jos e Angel Guti errez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant: Lessons from Cristal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 274. See also 118-119; Miguel B arragan, interview by author;

Reies López Tijerina also left Washington with a new approach in mind: running for elective office. Although he had lost some luster in the eyes of Chicano activists from elsewhere, he returned to Albuquerque seemingly a king. Arriving at the airport on July 20, 1968, Tijerina declared that, “For me (the campaign) was the greatest experience of my life and I feel a great satisfaction for what we have done to advance the rights of the poor. ... History is now on the side of the poor.”⁵⁵ A week later, his aides had convinced him to maintain his perceived personal momentum from the campaign by announcing his candidacy for governor on the People’s Constitutional Party (PCP) ticket. Paralleling the efforts of the La Raza Unida Party in Texas (and later in Colorado) and foreshadowing what his black counterparts did a few years later in places such as Oakland, California, Tijerina and Alianza aides viewed a statewide campaign as a way to capitalize on his heightened profile and to continue to spread the word about land rights in New Mexico. During the campaign, he mixed his land rights message with policy prescriptions popular with more urban Chicanos, including the restoration of bilingual education, greater welfare rights, a civilian police review board, and an end to discrimination on draft boards. Tijerina’s campaign that summer and fall received considerable attention, from ethnic Mexicans who believed they were left out of the system, from media observers, and especially from the mainstream parties. The latter’s effort focused on removing Tijerina from the ballot, which New Mexico’s secretary of state

New York Times, June 17, 1968 and April 20, 1969; Southwest Conference of La Raza brochure, undated, and SWCLR minutes, June 15, 1968, both in Box 65, Folder 16, UFW; Gómez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics*, 110-111; and Sepulveda, *The Life and Times of Willie Velasquez*, 64-65. Scholars of Chicano history, including Sepulveda, credit the Ford Foundation without mentioning the context of the Poor People’s Campaign.

⁵⁵ Reies López Tijerina, statement to the press, July 20, 1968, Box 31, Folder 28, RLT.

did by arguing that his felony conviction for trespassing on federal land disqualified him from state office. A state Supreme Court ruling upheld this decision and removed Tijerina, who was then replaced by activist José Alfredo Maestas. Despite Tijerina's disqualification and his successor's subsequent loss, a few journalists at the time argued that the PCP had affected the debate and helped re-elect Republican Governor David Cargo, who won by less than 3,000 votes.⁵⁶

Tijerina remained a prominent figure in New Mexico in the years to come, even as he fought state and federal charges from the 1967 courthouse raid. But unlike the Crusade for Justice and the Brown Berets, Tijerina saw his influence among the larger Chicano movement decline precipitously. And with him, an important alternative voice for the movement – one rooted more in legal documents than in cultural nationalism – declined as well. Tijerina continued to pursue the issues from his gubernatorial campaign, making him a fixture at Albuquerque school board meetings and an advocate for welfare rights, income maintenance programs, and sanitation workers' collective bargaining rights. Thanks in part to bridges he burned a year before in Washington, however, Tijerina received fewer and fewer invitations to speak. In late 1969, after Tijerina's wife, Patsy, burned Forest Service signs in the Santa Fe National Forest, authorities jailed and convicted him for aiding and

⁵⁶ *People's World*, April 6, 1968; *Denver Post*, July 28, 1968; *New York Times*, October 26, 1968; *El Grito del Norte*, August 24 and October 5 and 31, 1968; *Daily World*, October 16, 1968; *Albuquerque Journal*, November 7, 1968; Tijerina for Governor campaign material, "People's Constitutional Party General File," 1968, Box 32, Folders 6-7, RLT; Blawis, *Tijerina and the Land Grants*, 146-151; Richard Gardner, *Grito!*, 262-264; and T. Phillip Wolf, "The 1968 Elections in New Mexico," *The Western Political Quarterly* 22 (September 1969): 510-516. The PCP had several smaller constitutional impacts, including a change allowing candidates to run in a House district in which they did not reside. The PCP effort also prompted Democrats and Republicans to join in making conditions even stricter for third parties to make the ballot.

abetting in the destruction of U.S. government property. His 21-month imprisonment allowed those who embraced El Plan Espiritual to reshape the Alianza platform to include more explicit calls for cultural nationalism. Tijerina condemned Alianza's turn as unnecessarily separatist and counterproductive, a move which further marginalized the land grants leader even after his release from federal prison in 1971.⁵⁷

* * *

Most marchers, including those of other ethnicities, did not arrive home to organize high-profile events such as a national youth conference or a statewide party. But many did return with a renewed sense of mission and a belief that they could make a difference somewhere, if not in the nation's capital. From the campaign's youthful American Indian participants to the staff members of the Highlander Folk School, marchers pledged to make a lasting impact on their communities. Hank Adams, the fishing rights activist and veteran of the National Indian Youth Council, returned to Washington state armed with new allies to resume the fish-ins. In addition, he ran for Congress, challenging four-term incumbent Julia Butler Hansen on her positions from Indian policy to the War on Poverty. Although he did not expect to win, Adams recognized the power of such publicity. A few other people ran for office, such as Gilberto Gerena-Valentín and Grace Mora Newman, Puerto Ricans from New York City who sought seats on the City Council and in Congress, respectively. Vic Charlo, a Bitterroot Salish and Indian spokesman for the PPC, helped

⁵⁷ *Albuquerque Journal*, January 7-8, 18, and February 1, 1969, and *New Mexico Lobo*, March 5, 1969, all in Box 42, Folder 7; FBI reports, SD 157-815, February 3, 1969, San Diego, Calif., and AQ 100-2567, "Internal Security - Spanish American," March 13, 1969, both in Box 3, Folder 13, all in RLT; and Busto, *King Tiger*, 64-66.

found a school, Two Eagle River School, on the reservation where he grew up in Montana. And Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, a Lakota, toured her home state of Colorado to recount her time in Washington for white and Latino churchgoers. She recalled years later that the experience personally helped her become a leader in her community.⁵⁸

Older activist institutions for social justice and civil rights such as the Highlander School also found new life. Despite his much publicized gripe that whites largely had been segregated within Resurrection City, school founder Myles Horton maintained the cautious optimism that he had embraced after the Minority Group Conference in March, when he had “caught a glimpse of the future.”⁵⁹ He told his new acquaintance Reies Tijerina that:

I have a good feeling about the Poor People's Embassy now and am anxious to get down to work on the educational and cultural aspects. ... [W]hatever we are able to do that is worthwhile will be built on what is being done by people making up the Embassy. Together we might be able to increase our effectiveness by exchanging experiences and developing new programs tailored to the various areas and groups.⁶⁰

And he was not alone in thinking so. Highlander staff member Mike Clark believed that the campaign was a valuable “educational experiment. ... It is this experience of living together that will sow the seeds of change in the students of Resurrection City.”⁶¹ Executive director C. Conrad Browne echoed this sentiment in the months afterward. “It is good that you got there and participated in the activities,” Browne wrote one participant. “That experience

⁵⁸ *People's World*, August 24, September 14, and November 9, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, November 3 and 22, 1968; *Daily World*, July 31, 1968, and June 11, 1969; and Victor Charlo and Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, interviews by author.

⁵⁹ Myles Horton letter to Andrew Young, April 5, 1968, in Box 177, Folder 20, Part 4, Reel 26, frame 00614, SCLC.

⁶⁰ Myles Horton letter to Reies Tijerina, September 18, 1968, Box 49, Folder 20, RL.T.

⁶¹ Mike Clark, “Resurrection City comments,” December 13, 1968, Box 105, Folder 12, HREC.

was one of the best of the last several years. I have never seen education on such a mass scale as was taking place in Resurrection City.”⁶²

Horton, Clark, and Browne pursued several opportunities based on connections they had first established in Washington. While scholars have stressed those efforts that fizzled out, others clearly bore fruit.⁶³ In addition to the Poor People’s Embassy, Highlander emphasized building relationships in the Southwest, particularly in New Mexico. This took many forms, ranging from designing workshops and supporting a residential center for Chicanos in northern New Mexico to running cross-cultural programs for Navajo and Hopi Indians in the state’s Gallup area. Many of these programs reflected Highlander’s renewed efforts in Appalachia itself, especially “self-education programs” modeled after Highlander’s own citizenship schools from the 1950s and early 1960s. In Albuquerque, Highlander workshops provided valuable training and support for Gilberto Ballejos, the Brown Berets, and their allies. Ballejos, a former school teacher, facilitated several workshops designed to strengthen their organizing. Highlander also offered programmatic support for Escuela Tlatelolco, the Crusade for Justice’s freedom school in Denver.⁶⁴

⁶² Quote in C. Conrad Browne letter to F.R. Rowe, July 12, 1968, Box 98, Folder 16, HREC. Also, C. Conrad Browne letter to Charles G. Gomillion, April 1, 1970, Box 95, Folder 18; and Browne letter to Ernest Austin, February 17, 1969, Box 98, Folder 5.

⁶³ In their histories of Highlander, scholar John M. Glen and former executive director Frank Adams focus on the school’s heyday in the labor and civil rights movements. As a result, they only give Highlander’s efforts in the campaign, and in the Southwest and Chicago, brief consideration. Glen, *Highlander*, 215-217; and Adams, with Myles Horton, *Unearthing the Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1975), 180.

⁶⁴ “Highlander Self-Education Project,” in Myles Horton letter to Carl Rowan, May 16, 1969, Box 105, Folder 13, and Box 100, Folder 10; Myles Horton letter to Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, November 10, 1972, Mike Clark letter to Ricardo Romero, November 14, 1972, and Jim Branscome letter to José Gonzales, December 14, 1972, all in “Escuela,” Box 28, and Gilberto Ballejos,

Producing less concrete results and illustrating the continued challenges to interethnic collaboration were several workshops hosted by Highlander staff in Tennessee. In 1970 and 1971, Highlander invited a variety of activists from across the country to participate in weeklong discussions of how to strengthen multiethnic alliances among poor people. Participants included several ethnic Mexicans and Indians involved in Highlander West, such as the Alianza's Pedro Archuleta, *El Grito* writer/editor José Madril, Robert Tohe, and Shirley Hill Witt. Also participating were African Americans from the Southwest Georgia Project and Black Panthers and Young Lords from Chicago. According to Mike Clark, conversations during the workshops touched on issues of common concern, such as the role of land in the movement, and more service-oriented efforts such as food programs and health clinics. Individual friendships were also made. But he lamented that interethnic distrust remained an obstacle, particularly in dealing with Highlander's primarily white staff. "Many educational opportunities opened the first day were never adequately followed up (on)," wrote Clark about the 1970 conference. "Time after time I saw opportunities to tie ideas or statements to earlier ones but felt I could not because I was white."⁶⁵ This anxiety, even hostility, was not imagined. At various times, non-whites accused Highlander staff of working for the Central Intelligence Agency or cooperating with liberal foundation officials to "find out what people were really doing" with their money. Years of federal surveillance

"Introduction to Highlander West," October 18, 1969, "Ballejos report," Box 50, HREC; and *Southern Patriot*, April 1969.

⁶⁵ Mike Clark, "Multi-Racial Workshop Notes," May 2, 1970, Box 109, Folder 21, HREC.

and dirty tricks had taken its toll on many activists. The 1971 conference resulted in similar uneasiness among participants.⁶⁶

Yet, the workshops still prompted moments of clarity for its participants, often days or weeks after the programs had ended. For Arika Ducumus, a Filipino activist from San Francisco, the 1970 workshop paradoxically failed to provide “constructive data to bring back to my community” but still energized her and other activists she met. “[T]he overall emotional effect that it had on us folks was tremendous,” she wrote. She went on to explain how participants Patricia James, Jim Redcorn, and Eddie Brown, all close to burnout or pursuing other endeavors before the workshop, decided to devote themselves anew to their community projects in Georgia, Virginia, and New Mexico, respectively. “And me, after months of deliberation and avoidance of the issue, I’ve decided to return to school and set the S.F. Filipino community as my first priority,” Ducumus continued. “For all of us, thank you.”⁶⁷ Hoping “to see more of them in the future,” Shirley Hill Witt also viewed the conferences as enlightening.⁶⁸ Follow-ups by Mike Clark suggested other positive benefits, including Filipino visits to Indian communities in New Mexico, and ethnic Mexican help in

⁶⁶ On the 1970 workshop, see “Multi-Racial Workshop for American Poor,” n.d., Mike Clark, “Multi-Racial Workshop Notes,” May 2, 1970, and Conrad Browne letter to Shirley Witt, May 8, 1970, all in Box 109, Folder 21, HREC. For the 1971 workshop, see “The Social Movement Workshop,” n.d. [May 1971?], and directory of participants, April 26, 1971, both in Box 109, Folder 25, HREC.

⁶⁷ Arika Ducumus letter to “the Folks at Highlander,” June 15, 1970, Box 109, Folder 21, HREC. Ducumus also lamented the fact that participants’ suspicions prevented photography during the workshop, which she argued may have assisted in publicizing such programming. The pairing of Martin Luther King Jr. photos at Highlander and “Communist Training School” on billboards throughout the South may not have been far from organizers’ thoughts.

⁶⁸ Shirley Witt letter to Conrad Browne, May 1, 1970, Box 109, Folder 21, HREC.

forming a health clinic in Appalachia and generating new writing styles for activist newspapers.⁶⁹

Highlander officials' correspondence with most Western activists began to fade in late 1972. This probably occurred because of founder Myles Horton's retirement, the impending urban renewal of the center's Knoxville neighborhood, and the challenges those situations brought upon Highlander. But some communication persisted. For example, Highlander continued to check in with Maria Varela, who by then managed a community-based health clinic called La Clinica in Tierra Amarilla. The record elsewhere remains unclear. One aspect certainly had changed, however: by the mid-1970s, it had become standard practice to have not only black and white activists on the Highlander Center's board, but also ethnic Mexicans and American Indians. Valued input by Shirley Hill Witt, Pedro Archuleta, José Madril, and others – contacts born out of the PPC in 1968 – continued as Highlander re-devoted itself exclusively to the greater Appalachian region in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁰

* * *

For SCLC, the Washington campaign experience proved a devastating but not fatal blow to the organization. Coupled with King's death, the perceived disarray of the campaign jeopardized much of the organization's public and liberal foundation support, while it also

⁶⁹ See also Mike Clark, "Multi-Poor Workshop April 1970 excerpts and follow ups," [summer 1970?], Box 109, Folder 21, and Ed and Pat Lynch letter, July 15, 1970, Box 102, Folder 3, both in HREC.

⁷⁰ The last Myles Horton letter to Reies Tijerina found was dated March 9, 1973, in Box 49, Folder 20, RLT. See also "Highlander Committee on Resources," May 1975, Box 27, "Board of Directors," and board meeting minutes, undated [1975?], Box 50, "Appalachian Self-Education," both in HREC; and Glen, *Highlander*, 218.

exposed the fissures among SCLC's top leadership. As many historians have suggested, SCLC never again would enjoy the influence it had earlier in the decade. In fact, other than Adam Fairclough, scholars routinely dismiss SCLC as wholly inconsequential in the years after King's assassination.⁷¹ But this interpretation can be taken too far. The evidence suggests that SCLC retained some authority – particularly moral – after the summer of 1968. More significantly, SCLC did not retreat from its commitment to empowering the nation's poor. And although it was the most high-profile attempt, the Washington campaign was not the last effort made by SCLC under the moniker of the Poor People's Campaign.

Many African Americans had mixed feelings about SCLC and the campaign's legacy. They joined non-black participants in expressing their disappointment with SCLC officials' decision-making, such as Ralph Abernathy's choice to stay in the Pitts Motel until mid-June. According to Bertha Johnson Luster, a Marks, Mississippi, native and participant of the Mule Train, “ ’Til this day a lot of folk won't talk about the Mule Train. ... We knew that we weren't going to get forty acres and a mule, but we did believe the part about being able to get better jobs and a better education for our children. ... But most of us came back here to the same old same old.” Yet, Johnson also recalled that, “I gained the courage to speak up for myself. ... SCLC taught that there is no harm in speaking up.”⁷² Other blacks also said that, despite its flaws, the campaign made a difference. Frank Ditto, director of the East

⁷¹ Fairclough acknowledges SCLC's accomplishments in the South, such as the Charleston hospital workers strike and smaller protest efforts, into the 1970s. *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 394-397. See also Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 688-689; Sitkoff, *The Black Struggle for Equality*, 222-225; and Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*. In his brief epilogue, Branch does not discuss SCLC after King's death.

⁷² Freeman, *The Mule Train*, 114.

Side Voice of Independent Detroit, credited the PPC for increased black support locally for the United Farm Workers' grape boycott, while Gladys Givens of Seattle, who worked in Resurrection City's day care, believed the campaign ultimately "unified black people."⁷³ Perhaps such opinions explained why polls continued to demonstrate widespread black support for Abernathy and SCLC.⁷⁴

Not surprisingly, SCLC leaders boldly claimed victory during the Washington phase of the campaign, but not because of the lessons and contacts made by individual participants or the contributions made to other social movements. Instead, SCLC officials argued that the campaign had been a historic effort, the first of its kind that dramatized poverty to the point of making a significant difference in federal policy. Historians generally have brushed aside such assertions, burying the campaign amid the collective trauma of 1968 that helped propel Richard Nixon into the White House.⁷⁵ Undoubtedly, the Republican victory upset SCLC's long-term calculations, which had assumed the election of a new Democratic administration and one potentially more sympathetic to the poor.⁷⁶ But even though

⁷³ *Ghetto Speaks*, n.d. [1968?], in Box 4, Folder 20, Administrative Department, Pt. 1, UFW; and *Daily World*, August 10, 1968. See also Roland Freeman's interview with Lee Dora Collins. *The Mule Train*, 115-117.

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, September 3, 1968.

⁷⁵ For instance, see Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, Chapter 14; and Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, Chapter 12.

⁷⁶ Most polls in the spring and early summer consistently had shown Democrats ahead of GOP frontrunner Nixon – first President Johnson, then Senators Robert F. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, and lastly eventual nominee Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Nixon pulled ahead in the polls only after a Republican National Convention widely praised for its efficiency and unity, and a Democratic National Convention marred by police riots. *New York Times*, February 6, April 6 and 21, June 12, July 11 and 23, and August 21 and 28, September 15, and October 10, 1968.

Nixon's victory endangered SCLC plans for a vigorous federal shift toward anti-poverty programs, the PPC won several short-term policy gains.

Amid many vague promises made by government officials to "look into" a variety of complaints, concrete policy and budgetary changes stood out. They included: a \$100 million program for free and reduced-price lunches for poor children; the immediate release of surplus commodities to the nation's 1,000 poorest counties; \$25 million for Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and Head Start programs in Alabama and Mississippi; the hiring of more than 1,300 poor people by OEO agencies; a mild expansion of the food stamp program, reducing its cost to recipients; and a streamlining of some federal welfare guidelines, including those referring to the male partners of women welfare recipients. Such changes seemed minor compared to PPC organizers' ambitious objectives of jobs or income for all. However, as one independent observer argued:

[I]t must be stressed that nothing had worsened in the fields of welfare and employment, that the PPC had been a remarkably successful holding action against the forces of reaction in a time when the country was clearly turning more and more conservative. Head Start and school lunch programs had actually been slightly strengthened at a time when many commentators foresaw the probability of their being seriously crippled or killed.⁷⁷

Given the political climate, expanding any budget items for programs fighting poverty was an accomplishment, a point increasingly made by SCLC activists.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ David Wham, "The Politics and Dramatism of Conflict in the Poor People's Campaign: A Case Study," January 1969, Box 10, "Wham 4th," AGP.

⁷⁸ Jesse Jackson, "Resurrection City: The Dream, the Accomplishments," *Ebony* 23 (October 1968): 65-74; Bill Hayden memo to Eleanor Eaton, August 12, 1968, CRD 32556, "PPC: General," AFSC; *Soul Force*, June 19, July 15, and August 15, 1968; *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 25, July 2, 13, and December 4, 1968; *Evening Star*, June 7, 1968; *Washington Post*, June 30, 1968; *New York Times*, June 30, 1968; and Nick Kotz, *Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.:

Claims of mild policy success did not come solely from loyal SCLC activists or left-leaning academics, but also from more unlikely sources inside the Johnson administration and the media. Indeed, despite President Johnson's quiet but furious opposition, his most influential aides had argued that assisting the campaign in small ways best served the president. As presidential aide James Gaither put it, "I have little doubt that history will acclaim the objectives of the Poor People's Campaign, irrespective of the means chosen and the violence caused."⁷⁹ White House staff members Joseph Califano, Matt Nimetz, and others saw ominous parallels between the PPC and the Bonus Army March of 1932, the latter handled so poorly by the government that it helped solidify opposition to President Hoover and became an enduring symbol of his administration's cold-hearted response to the Great Depression. "[W]e can learn from their mistakes," wrote Nimetz, recommending that Califano read Arthur Schlesinger's account of the earlier march. "I believe we can deal with the Poor People's Campaign in a more civilized manner."⁸⁰

The administration never determined a clear, consistent policy on the campaign, much to the chagrin of government officials who dealt with the marchers directly. "[S]ome

Prentice-Hall, 1969), 171-192. Kotz notes that Johnson continued to oppose massive expansion of such hunger programs and concluded that, "There is little doubt that Congress would have taken major steps forward on the hunger issue in 1968 if Lyndon Johnson had only lent his support." *Promises*, 190.

⁷⁹ James Gaither memo to Harry McPherson, June 21, 1968, Legislative Background Box 1, "Death of Martin Luther King and Subsequent Riots – Poor People's Campaign," LBJ.

⁸⁰ Quote in Matt Nimetz memo to Joe Califano, May 16, 1968, Legislative Background Box 1, "Death of Martin Luther King and Subsequent Riots – Poor People's Campaign," LBJ. See also Nimetz memos to Califano, April 24-25, 1968, Legislative Background Box 1, "Death of Martin Luther King and Subsequent Riots – Poor People's Campaign," LBJ. For more on the Bonus Army, see Chapter Two.

kind of uniform approach would have been better” and could have assured a successful campaign, argued Ralph Huitt, assistant secretary for legislation at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.⁸¹ Instead, the result was a limited amount of cooperation behind the scenes – and even faint praise – after it became clear that Ralph Abernathy would not be persuaded to cancel the march. In addition to granting a permit and then an extension to camp on the Washington Mall, the administration struck a moderate tone, especially Attorney General Ramsey Clark and Roger Wilkins of the Community Relations Division (CRD) in the Justice Department. In Cabinet meetings, Clark defended campaigners’ right to protest, even after they turned some of their most damning attacks on his own department. Wilkins supplied Clark with sympathetic reports from the campaign on the ground. And even President Johnson implored his agency heads to respond promptly and fully to the campaign’s demands. A few of those secretaries offered the administration’s most direct praise of the campaign. Even Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Wilbur Cohen, generally critical of the PPC, begrudgingly gave the campaign credit for many of his department’s efforts in the last days of the Johnson administration. Progress had been made particularly in the realm of legal services for the poor, recipients’ participation in advisory committees on welfare programs, and teacher training for both bilingual education and programs for disadvantaged children.⁸²

⁸¹ Ralph K. Huitt, assistant secretary for legislation in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, interview by Helen Hall, September 17, 1969, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

⁸² Cabinet meeting minutes, March 13, April 3, May 1, 14 and 29, 1968, Box 13, and June 12, 1968, Box 14, Cabinet Papers; Roger Wilkins daily summary memos to Ramsey Clark, May 15-28, 1968, Box 73, "Poor People's Campaign -- CRS Daily Log," Papers of Ramsey Clark; Thomas H. Baker interview with Andrew Young, June 18, 1970, Oral History Collection, all in LBJ. Also, Wilbur

Such efforts of course do not excuse the corrosive effect of the FBI's counterintelligence program, which many scholars argue actively undermined the campaign.⁸³ Ramsey Clark received reports from not just CRD but also the FBI, Secret Service, and military intelligence, all of which had paid informants in the campaign's participating organizations. A review of FBI paperwork on the campaign reveals a large surveillance effort, although active sabotage of the campaign beyond the occasional dissemination of misinformation remains extremely difficult to prove.⁸⁴

* * *

Despite the setbacks of the summer, SCLC leaders continued to use the slogan of the Poor People's Campaign in supporting economic justice efforts in the South, particularly a series of successful labor strikes. First in SCLC's hometown of Atlanta and then in Charleston, South Carolina, the organization threw its support behind workers and offered a compelling model for a civil rights-labor coalition on the eve of the 1970s. In the Atlanta work stoppage, nearly 800 black sanitation workers in Atlanta struck for better wages and conditions in September 1968.⁸⁵ SCLC officials organized local ministers to show solidarity

Cohen letter to Richard Weil, assistant to Marian E. Wright, January 17, 1969, Box 15, Folder 16, KOTZ; Cohen letter to Ralph Abernathy, June 18, 1968, CRD 32554, AFSC; and *New York Times*, June 30, 1968

⁸³ For example, see Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, Chapter 3; and McKnight, *The Last Crusade*.

⁸⁴ "Ticker Tapes - Poor People's Campaign, 3 of 4," HU4 confidential Box 57, 2 of 2, LBJ.

⁸⁵ The strike added to the list of high-profile work stoppages by sanitation workers that year. Most involved predominantly African American sanitation forces, striking for better wages and benefits, similar to their Memphis counterparts. Those cities included St. Petersburg, Florida; Baltimore; New Orleans; Gary, Indiana; Chicago; and Cleveland. Other cities, such as Scranton, Pennsylvania; Oklahoma City; Evansville, Indiana; Miami Beach; and Boca Raton, Florida, also saw garbage strikes. In New York City a strike left mounds of garbage for nine days in February 1968, but rather than

with union demonstrators and to help negotiate with the city, including threatening to lie in front of garbage trucks before they could leave a city vehicle depot.⁸⁶ According to Andrew Young, however, outgoing Mayor Ivan Allen “did not want to see this escalate into a major confrontation ... [H]aving presided over the ‘City Too Busy to Hate,’ I think he wanted to leave office with his progressive reputation intact.”⁸⁷ The city soon offered a modest pay increase with no recriminations against striking workers. For Young, it cemented his reputation among city officials that he was a reasonable leader. And to Ralph Abernathy and the rest of the SCLC leadership, the Atlanta resolution proved that the organization still could make a difference locally in the lives of poor people.⁸⁸

In late 1968 and early 1969, SCLC reaffirmed its dedication to economic justice by descending on Charleston, South Carolina, where the civil rights organization harnessed its resources and allies to the cause of a mostly black female work force in that city’s hospitals. An effort usually oversimplified or marginalized by movement scholars, the Charleston campaign not only represented another labor-civil rights coalition, but also the centrality of

highlight racial discrimination, the strike was a test of white ethnic working-class power in a period of declining unionization. *New York Times*, March 1 and 22, and September 10 and 14, 1968.

⁸⁶ *Atlanta Daily World*, September 8, 1968.

⁸⁷ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 494.

⁸⁸ *New York Times*, September 6, 9 and 11, 1968; *Atlanta Daily World*, September 11-15, 1968, and March 20, 1970; *Atlanta Constitution*, September 10-14, 1968; and Young, *An Easy Burden*, 493-495. Two years later, workers joined a larger municipal strike of almost 2,500 people, and SCLC became involved again in support of the workers. Abernathy and Hosea Williams found themselves leading marches, protests, and rallies for most of the thirty-seven days, as many others in the religious, labor, and civil rights communities joined the fight, including the national AFL-CIO. The strike ended with workers winning substantial pay concessions. *New York Times*, March 25 and April 23, 1970; and *Atlanta Daily World*, March 29 and April 1-5, 7, 17, 22, 24, 1970.

women to such organizing.⁸⁹ Tired of being under-paid, disrespected by their white colleagues, and at constant risk of losing their jobs for arbitrary reasons, several black, female Medical College workers led by nurse's aide and Highlander School-trained Mary Moultrie began to discuss how to organize themselves better. Although the workers had not considered a union at first, Moultrie had asked for help from tobacco union official Isaiah Bennett and Black Power advocate Bill Saunders after the Medical College fired five workers in February 1968 in a dispute over access to medical records.⁹⁰ While longtime activists Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins led energetic and largely working-class protesters in local sympathy marches for the Poor People's Campaign, hospital workers endured more slights by their employers. The message of poor people's power percolated among increasingly frustrated black workers and by the fall, Mary Moultrie's gatherings had attracted up to 500

⁸⁹ Unlike Memphis, Charleston has received relatively little attention – particularly the intersection of gender, class, race, labor, and civil rights. Those scholars who have studied the strike have focused on the longtime failure of the labor-civil rights coalition and the strike's watershed effect on race relations in Charleston. See Leon Fink, "Union Power and Soul Power: The Story of 1199B and Labor's Search for a Southern Strategy," *Southern Changes* (March/April 1983): 9-20; Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); and Stephen O'Neill, "From the Shadow of Slavery: The Civil Rights Years in Charleston" (Ph.D. diss, University of Virginia, 1994), 248-287, and "The Struggle for Black Equality Comes to Charleston: The Hospital Strike of 1969," *Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* 60 (1986): 82-91.

⁹⁰ Registered nurses routinely provided medical records to white nursing assistants and licensed practical nurses to ensure better medical care, but not always to black aides. In this instance, the five fired workers had walked off the job, angry over this violation of custom. Leon Fink, "Union Power and Soul Power: The Story of 1199B and Labor's Search for a Southern Strategy," *Southern Changes* (March/April 1983): 11.

people each meeting – from nurse’s aides and licensed practical nurses to orderlies and cafeteria workers, all black and nearly all female.⁹¹

Initially viewing the situation as a way to rebuild fundraising networks, Abernathy and Young first committed SCLC to Charleston in October 1968. Workers had contacted New York’s Local 1199 of the Hospital and Nursing Home Employees Union, an ally of King’s organization since he lent support to black and Puerto Rican hospital workers’ initial fight to unionize in 1959-1960. Local 1199 had been one of the few union supporters of the PPC and, after King’s death, had retained connections to SCLC through Coretta Scott King and Stanley Levison. “[I]he hospital workers ... fit perfectly into our desire to combat fundamental economic inequities and was consistent with the long-term aims of the Poor People’s Campaign,” recalled Young. “In addition, in Septima Clark we had a staff person who knew intimately the personalities and tendencies of black and white leadership in Charleston.”⁹² When Clark and SCLC field staffer Bernice Robinson informed the Atlanta office of the women’s desire for organizational help, SCLC quickly dispatched James Orange to Charleston for a week of training and other logistical assistance. The workers immediately put the help to good use by organizing picket lines outside the hospital and meeting more formally with the state legislature’s Charleston delegation.⁹³

⁹¹ O’Neill, “From the Shadow of Slavery,” 251-252; Fink, “Union Power and Soul Power,” 11; and Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 546.

⁹² Young, *An Easy Burden*, 497.

⁹³ O’Neill, “From the Shadow of Slavery,” 266-267; Fink, “Union Power and Soul Power,” 9, 13; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 497; and Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 544. For a more holistic examination of the 40,000-plus-member union, see Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*.

Not until March, however, as SCLC prepared to announce another stage of its anti-poverty campaign to mark the assassination anniversary, did tensions push the hospital workers to drastic action – and SCLC into an ever deeper commitment. After hospital officials invited union foes to a long-awaited meeting with workers, 450 employees staged a walkout and accused the administration of being disingenuous and heavy-handed. The Medical College countered by firing twelve leaders among the workers, including Moultrie, and the next day, more than 400 workers went on strike. Other than Local 1199, SCLC became the first prominent organization to signal its support for the workers, and it began to mobilize its civil rights, religious, and labor contacts locally and nationally. Promising “to sock it to Charleston,” Abernathy and an entourage of aides went to Charleston, tapped local ministers to hold mass rallies, inspired marches and protests in the city’s historic business district, and helped spark “a conspicuous shift in focus as the strike became a social movement.”⁹⁴ The campaign intensified in late April and early May as ten marches were held in six days, Abernathy called for a boycott by school children, and protesting women conducted “shop-ins” downtown by crowding grocery store and cash register lines. Police arrested more than a 1,000 marchers during the 113-day strike, including Abernathy, jailed for the twenty-fourth time in his civil rights career. Similar to the Washington welfare rights march of a year earlier, a Mother’s Day March became a defining moment, drawing a crowd of 12,000. There, Coretta Scott King captivated the crowd full of placards declaring “I Am Somebody,” while Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers publicly offered a \$10,000

⁹⁴ Quotes in *New York Times*, April 23, 1969, and Fink, “Union Power and Soul Power,” 14.

check to the cause. The NAACP, AFL-CIO, and the UAW-Teamsters Alliance for Labor Action sent money and (wo)manpower, while forty-two sympathetic U.S. senators and House members called for federal mediation. Yet the hospital administration, backed by the city's white elites, refused to negotiate for two and a half months – despite the damage inflicted on the tourist city's public image.⁹⁵

Hospital officials agreed to negotiate in June 1969 only after a plea from the White House amid the threat of spreading labor activism to the Port of Charleston and the state's textile industry. Although the striking workers walked away with a partial victory – a healthy pay raise and their jobs back, but no union recognition – the significance of the Charleston campaign went much further. News of the settlement and the presence of Mrs. King on election eve motivated hospitals in Baltimore to negotiate with some 7,500 employees, while hospital workers in Florida, Kansas, Ohio, Georgia, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh asked for Local 1199's assistance. In the magnolia city, the strike had strengthened the black community's resolve in areas outside of the workplace. Voter registration increased and whites proved quicker to talk. They “respect blacks for having organized,” said activist Bill Saunders. “They're a little scared now and will negotiate before they reach that same level of polarization.”⁹⁶ This undermined more traditional assumptions about race relations, which in Charleston was no small feat, considering the city's immense pride in its southern heritage – even its historic role in the slave economy. In the following years, the election of African

⁹⁵ *New York Times*, April 1, 5, 8, 11, 21, 23, 27, 29 and May 4, 1969; *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 1969; Fink, “Union Power and Soul Power,” 12-13, 15-16; and O'Neill, “From the Shadow of Slavery,” 267-268.

⁹⁶ Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 155.

Americans to public office, the emergence of an Operation Breadbasket chapter, and other black activism among both middle and working class African Americans, helped replace the white-dominated political oligarchy and its moderate black allies with a more diverse one.⁹⁷

For SCLC, “phase two of the Poor People’s Campaign,” as Ralph Abernathy called Charleston, provided a certain level of redemption for the chaotic Washington experience of a year before, as well as a revamped model for the civil rights organization’s activism.⁹⁸

SCLC had emerged from Charleston in relative financial health and, at least in some quarters, out from under the shadow of Dr. King. Andrew Young remembered Charleston as the “singinest, preachinest, clappinest movement since our days in Albany and Selma.”⁹⁹ Yet the campaign also distinguished itself from those earlier efforts of SCLC by highlighting women’s leadership rather than that of male ministers.¹⁰⁰ While Ralph Abernathy spent more than a week in jail, fasting at times in solidarity with the hospital workers, it was the actions of Coretta Scott King, Septima Clark, Mary Moultrie, and the striking women themselves that made the most difference in galvanizing community support and maintaining pressure on white powerbrokers. In the wake of her husband’s death, Mrs. King became a sought-after speaker for progressive causes and emerged as a leader in her

⁹⁷ *Jet*, May 5, 1969, and *1199 Drug and Hospital News*, July 1969, both in Part 3, Reel 10, frames 0843-0853, SCLC; *New York Times*, June 26 and 28, 1969, and March 22 and May 30, 1970; *Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 1970; Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 159-167; and O’Neil, “From the Shadow of Slavery,” 285-287.

⁹⁸ Quote in *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1969.

⁹⁹ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 501.

¹⁰⁰ Historians generally have ignored the role of gender in the Charleston strike – especially in the context of SCLC and its own paternalist organizing model.

own right, especially when issues of gender explicitly overlapped that of race and class. In a speech to a packed Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, King placed the workers' situation in a different context than Abernathy usually did. Calling herself a "sister 1199er," King told the mostly female audience: "Many of our hospital workers throughout the nation are women – black women, many of whom are the main supporters of their families. I feel that the black woman in our nation, the black working woman, is perhaps the most discriminated against."¹⁰¹ King returned to Charleston several times during the strike and remained on the Local 1199 organizing committee for years. She continued to be a huge draw as she actively sought to link her husband's civil rights philosophy and her own gender analysis to the other movements of the day, from welfare rights and farm labor unionization, to peace and women's liberation.¹⁰²

Locally, Septima Clark and Mary Moultrie had, in different ways, set the stage for the strike and Coretta Scott King's influential appearances. Although semi-retired from the citizenship schools that she had run for Highlander and SCLC since the 1950s, Clark remained one of the city's most influential grassroots black leaders. "She was a woman

¹⁰¹ Coretta Scott King, in "I Am Somebody," New York: Icarus Films, 1970 – a union-produced film on the strike.

¹⁰² *Jet*, April 10, May 15 and 22, and October 30, 1969; *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 17, 1969; *People's World*, November 29, 1969; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 1, 2006; *Newsweek*, March 24, 1969; C.L. Sanders, "Finally, I've Begun to Live Again," *Ebony* 26 (November 1970): 172-181; Alice Walker, "Growing Strength of Coretta King," *Redbook* 137 (September 1971): 96-7; and Octavia Vivian, *Coretta: The Story of Coretta Scott King* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1970; 2006), 113, 129-134. Remarkably, other than her advocacy for a King holiday and a "living memorial" to her husband, Coretta Scott King's activism largely has been ignored by historians. Her legacy is another casualty of scholars' tendency to privilege a periodization ending with the civil rights leader's death in 1968.

everybody knew and really, really respected,” recalled Mary Moultrie.¹⁰³ The citizenship schools in South Carolina, in which many African Americans learned to read, write, and know their constitutional rights, provided her with a solid base to call upon blacks to act. As one scholar points out, it was Clark’s leadership in a Charleston sympathy march for the Poor People’s Campaign in May 1968 that helped rally the community behind working-class issues.¹⁰⁴

Such efforts complemented Mary Moultrie’s leadership well. As the striking workers’ spokeswoman and leader of the fledgling Local 1199B, Moultrie in a light blue Local 1199 hat became the face of the movement. A Charleston native, Moultrie had left Charleston “because there were no jobs of consequence to be had for blacks in the city,” but not before she had worked for Esau Jenkins at his motel and with Highlander’s Guy Carawan on small community projects.¹⁰⁵ That exposure to civil rights activism, combined with her experience as a nurse’s aide – a lower position than the one she held in New York because Medical College denied her credentials – emboldened her actions on behalf of her fellow workers after returning from New York in 1966. In a speech to the AFL-CIO convention that year, she struck a modest tone, praising SCLC and the black community for doing their part. “They struggled with us and they suffered alongside us,” Moultrie said. “Because like

¹⁰³ O’Neill, “From the Shadow of Slavery,” 273.

¹⁰⁴ O’Neill, “From the Shadow of Slavery,” 248-252; Esau Jenkins, interview by Jim Leeson, May 1968, Charleston, S.C., MSRC; and Young, *An Easy Burden*, 496. See also Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 68-77; Septima Poinsette Clark, *Ready From Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1990); and Katherine Mellen Charron, “We’ve Come A Long Way: Septima Clark, the Warings and the Changing Civil Rights Movement,” in *Groundwork*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 116-139.

¹⁰⁵ *Jet*, June 5, 1969.

hospital workers, they, too, were sick and tired of being sick and tired ... And together we faced this armed strength with our bodies, with our souls, and with our hearts.”¹⁰⁶ After the strike ended, the workers made it clear how important she was by electing her president of 1199B.¹⁰⁷

That what turned out to be SCLC’s last prominent campaign was sparked, led, and dominated by black women should have given the organization pause when navigating its own leadership troubles. Perhaps women needed to play a larger public role in the next phases of SCLC’s fight for economic justice, under the umbrella of the Poor People’s Campaign or something else. Not only did women bring grassroots organizing skills sometimes taken for granted by the charismatic leadership inherent to SCLC, but women also were more likely to be poor than men. Charleston drove this point home in many ways, as an estimated eighty percent of the strikers were single mothers. Building and supporting indigenous leadership, such as reinvigorating the citizenship schools and other programs that empowered women, while placing dynamic individuals such as Coretta Scott King and Marian Wright Edelman in prominent policy leadership positions, may have rejuvenated an organization seeking a new identity. The victory among the magnolias could have been a watershed moment for SCLC. Instead, SCLC paternalism in its relations with women – as well as with other ethnic minorities – persisted, increasingly marginalizing the organization at the precise moment when the women’s and Chicano movements were on the rise.

¹⁰⁶ *People’s World*, November 29, 1969.

¹⁰⁷ *Jet*, June 5, 1969; *People’s World*, November 29, 1969; Fink, “Union Power and Soul Power,” 11; and O’Neill, “From the Shadow of Slavery,” 258-259.

This was evident in Coretta Scott King's poor treatment within SCLC. King had wanted to involve herself more in the organization's executive leadership, but her husband's aides (as he himself had before) resisted the idea vehemently. Jesse Jackson's dismissive tone, speaking to his staff about King, was typical: "We'll take care of our business and then Mrs. King can do her woman-power thing."¹⁰⁸ Despite calling Abernathy "hopeless and unbelievable," an exasperated Stanley Levison also did not view King as capable of proper leadership.¹⁰⁹ Calling her "inadequate" and full of "conceit," Levison told Andrew Young and Bill Rutherford that, "she does not have the capacity to solve the problems (of the organization), that he does not believe she should go into leadership but if she does he will not go with her."¹¹⁰ Perhaps still stung by her earlier criticism of their decision-making during the Washington campaign, Young and Rutherford agreed at the time and joined Levison and others within SCLC in encouraging her to focus on her book about her life with Dr. King, which many saw as a certain money-maker. "Ralph and the board wanted to use Coretta to raise money for SCLC, but they didn't want her to play any kind of policy role in the organization," Young recalled. "The men in SCLC were incapable of dealing with a strong woman like Coretta, who was insisting on being treated as an equal."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ *Harper's magazine*, March 1969, 62.

¹⁰⁹ FBI memo on Levison phone conversation, New York, June 6, 1968.

¹¹⁰ FBI memo on Levison phone conversation, New York, June 5, 1968.

¹¹¹ Quote in Young, *An Easy Burden*, 479. Sanders, "Finally, I've Begun to Live Again," *Ebony*, 174, 180-181; Henry P. Lieferman, "Profession: Concert Singer, Freedom Movement Lecturer," *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 1972; New York field office memo to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, June 7, 1968; *Chicago Defender*, June 29-July 5, 1968; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 392. Coretta Scott King's book, *My Life with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*, ends not surprisingly with her husband's funeral – before her troubles with the organization he once led came to a head.

Although on the surface Ralph Abernathy's leadership won several internal endorsements, observers and colleagues alike had deep-seated doubts about his abilities and vision to guide the organization in the long term. SCLC conventions in Memphis and Charleston unanimously elected him president in 1968 and 1969. In addition to the strike resolutions, SCLC under Abernathy had spearheaded successful voter registration and school desegregation efforts, most spectacularly in Greene County, Alabama, where blacks won a majority on the local county council. Abernathy was an easy compromise choice, as much rewarded for being King's closest and most loyal friend in the organization as for the belief that his election would avoid a divisive fight over the presidency. "We knew that Ralph had weaknesses," said Andrew Young, "but there was a logic to his ascension on which we could all agree."¹¹² As both journalists and insiders had harped upon during the days of Resurrection City, those weaknesses stood in stark contrast to his predecessor's skills.¹¹³

This became most clear in Abernathy's failed attempts to spread a new phase of the Poor People's Campaign outside of Charleston. Avoiding a repeat of a Resurrection City-style encampment, SCLC returned to more conventional marches in the name of economic justice, such as ones led by longtime SCLC field organizers R.B. Cottonreader in Mississippi and Hosea Williams in Georgia. But these attracted hundreds of people, not thousands, and little to no press. Echoing Solidarity Day themes from a year before, SCLC's demands to "wipe out hunger" gained some consideration from the White House and Congress, both of

¹¹² Young, *An Easy Burden*, 502.

¹¹³ *Jet*, September 19, 1968, and August 14, 1969.

which had been working on the problem since the Washington campaign had highlighted it so well.¹¹⁴ Indeed, under considerable political pressure, even Nixon had promised in early May “to end hunger in America for all time.”¹¹⁵ But Abernathy’s individual meeting with President Nixon generated little substantive dialogue on a range of other issues, including welfare reform, a guaranteed national income, and free food stamps. Dissatisfied with the meeting, the frustrated SCLC president called it, “the most disappointing and the most fruitless of all the meetings we have had up to this time.”¹¹⁶ Nixon compounded Abernathy’s disappointment a few months later when the president unveiled a guaranteed income plan, but one so low that it barely covered the amount of food nutrition experts recommended that a family of four eat. As Adam Fairclough put it, “There were no new national victories” for SCLC.¹¹⁷

Although other poor people’s leaders joined Abernathy in his 1969 visit to Washington, most connections made by SCLC a year before remained superficial at best. These ranged from National Welfare Rights Organization activists to Chicano movement leaders. NWRO’s George Wiley and Johnnie Tillmon, who had viewed cooperation in the PPC in 1968 as a way to gain national publicity, declined an invitation to participate in

¹¹⁴ *New York Times*, May 17, 1969.

¹¹⁵ Kotz, *Let Them Eat Promises*, 224.

¹¹⁶ *New York Times*, May 14, 1969.

¹¹⁷ Quote in Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 396. Kotz, *Let Them Eat Promises*, 193-223; G.C. Moore FBI memo to W.C. Sullivan, April 24, 1969; SAC-Washington memo to FBI Director, May 1, 1969; Washington FBI memo, May 19, 1969; SAC-Jackson memo to FBI Director, May 26, June 6, 9-10, 12-13 and 15, and July 11, 1969; SAC-Mobile memo to FBI Director, June 22, 1969; *New York Times*, May 11, 13-14, 17, 1969; and Walter Fauntroy memo to SCLC staff, April 29, 1969, in Box 13, Folder 13, KOTZ.

another Washington march and cited SCLC's inability to "adequately involve us in the planning of campaign demands and development of basic campaign strategy."¹¹⁸ Another reality was that because NWRO had raised its profile so much in one year, the organization had little to gain from joining forces with Abernathy. President Nixon already was engaged with the issues of welfare rights and income maintenance. Other relationships also seemed to have had a shallow quality to them, such as Abernathy's brief telegrams of support to Reies Tijerina during the latter's legal problems and illness in prison, and SCLC communications to the Crusade for Justice in Denver. The multiethnic activities of the Poor People's Embassy and Highlander West, although fleeting, also moved on without SCLC participation.¹¹⁹

One exception was Abernathy's participation in the Coachella-to-Calexico march in support of striking farm workers in the spring of 1969. Joining a rainbow of local union and strike supporters, Abernathy told marchers that he, too, was a Mexican in spirit and that the "white man establishment's plan to divide Mexicans and blacks will not work because Negroes understand that 'su lucha es mi lucha.'"¹²⁰ He went on to lead the march for two miles before meeting with César Chávez. But despite the powerful gesture, Abernathy's appearance with Chávez produced more questions than it did answers. It was not clear who

¹¹⁸ George Wiley and Johnnie Tillmon letter to Abernathy, May 6, 1969, Box 15, Folder 16, KOTZ.

¹¹⁹ George Wiley and Johnnie Tillmon letter to Abernathy, May 6, 1969, Box 15, Folder 16, KOTZ; Abernathy telegrams to Reies Tijerina, March 31 and December 22, 1969, and Abernathy telegrams to Patsy Tijerina, April 27 and May 17, 1971, all in Box 34, Folder 20, RLT; Rudy Gonzales, interview by author. Yet another example was the criticism that Abernathy drew from comedian Dick Gregory and his wife after the SCLC president demonstrated his ignorance of Gregory's high-profile jailing during a Chicago protest rally. *Jet*, May 22, 1969.

¹²⁰ *New York Times*, May 18, 1969.

gained more from the meeting. In many ways, Abernathy needed to burnish his reputation by associating with Chávez, seen by many as a Mexican Martin Luther King Jr. SCLC leaders invited Chávez to its conventions or other activities into the 1970s, but Chávez always turned them down. There was no evidence that reciprocal invitations were forthcoming from UFW. Such had become the reality for SCLC, which one year after King's death, was still insistent on an organizing model reliant on a male charismatic presence – but without an individual at the top who suitably could fill that role.¹²¹

The constant challenges to Abernathy's leadership, as well as overall organizational inertia, eventually exhausted many of SCLC's top officials. Both Bernard Lafayette and James Bevel left to pursue other interests, as did Andrew Young. Although often touted as a potentially more effective president than Abernathy, Young turned his attention instead to electoral politics, as some of his ethnic Mexican and American Indian counterparts had done in the years after the campaign. "I saw political office as a way of sustaining what we had done and needed to do again rather than as a deviation from our history of collective struggle," Young recalled. "My colleagues had a lukewarm reaction to my decision, though, and seemed to feel that I was running out on them."¹²² And in some ways, he was, since he did not return to the organization after losing a tight congressional race in 1970. Instead, he prepared for a rematch, which he won. Over the next decade, Young became the U.S.

¹²¹ SAC-Washington memo to FBI Director, May 12, 1969; *New York Times*, May 18, 1969; *People's World*, May 24, 1969; Abernathy letter to Dolores Huerta, July 29, 1969, Abernathy letter to Chávez, July 25, 1970, and Hosea Williams letters to Chávez, March 12 and April 21, 1971, all in Box 5, Folder 38, Administrative Department Papers, UFW.

¹²² Young, *An Easy Burden*, 508.

ambassador to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter and then mayor of Atlanta.¹²³

Jesse Jackson also enjoyed a high-profile ascendancy after King's death and the Washington campaign. More than any other SCLC staffer, the director of Operation Breadbasket emerged from the Poor People's Campaign with a stronger, more national image. Although Jackson had been "city manager" of Resurrection City for a while, Abernathy demoted him and unwittingly did the Chicago minister a huge favor. Avoiding journalists' blame for Resurrection City's problems, Jackson instead charmed the national press corps with his charisma and unique blend of capitalist solutions, black pride, and Christian moral authority. The result was an avalanche of positive publicity and the transformation of a mildly effective local leader in Chicago into a national civil rights star. That Jackson maintained his home base in Chicago – rather than relocate to Atlanta as Abernathy and other SCLC officials had urged – was significant. Not only could Jackson retain his independence there, but it also was in the Windy City where he could witness firsthand both the promise and difficulty of interethnic organizing in the late 1960s.¹²⁴

* * *

Chicago is an interesting case study of the challenge of interethnic organizing at the end of the decade. By the spring and summer of 1968, status quo politics in Chicago appeared imperiled, first by the racial uprisings after King's assassination and then the

¹²³ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 508-513; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 391; Billy Hollins, interview by author, October 9, 2006, Atlanta, Georgia; and Bernard Lafayette, interview by author.

¹²⁴ Calvin Morris and Billy Hollins, interviews by author; and Barbara Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson: America's David* (Washington, D.C.: JFJ Associates, 1985; 1975), 316.

nationally televised police riot that ensued during the Democratic National Convention (DNC). These dramatic events generally have overshadowed much of the other activism taking place in the city that year, including a series of labor strikes, economic boycotts, and welfare rights protests. Thus, even while SCLC's Washington campaign may have come to a grinding halt early that summer, a loose network of activists of different colors and backgrounds – some of whom participated in the Poor People's Campaign – had begun to emerge in the city. Despite its universal reputation for hardball politics and expansive corruption, Chicago in the late 1960s offered a glimpse of what multiethnic organizing could look like, as well as the forces determined to stop it.¹²⁵

As he had done in Miami Beach, Ralph Abernathy led a contingent of poor people to Chicago to dramatize poverty outside of the DNC and demand a recommitment to the government-funded War on Poverty. But it was Jesse Jackson's efforts through Operation Breadbasket that garnered the most attention during the summer of 1968 and beyond. Returning to Chicago in June, Jackson and the staff of Breadbasket, most prominently Calvin Morris, Gary Massoni, and Willie Barrow, recognized that, in a more conservative political climate,

building economic viability in the black community shifts our focus from economic security to economic independence. As this occurs we need to understand that
BLACK COOPERATION IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE EXPRESSION OF

¹²⁵ Gary Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie: Chicago's Harold Washington and the Politics of Race* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1992), 4-18; Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 326; and Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, 103-104, 156. See also William J. Grimshaw, *Black Politics and the Chicago Machine, 1931-1991* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

RESPONSIBLE AND MEANINGFUL BLACK POWER that is POSSIBLE FOR
BLACK PEOPLE AND BLACK ORGANIZATIONS.¹²⁶

In other words, Breadbasket tried to frame itself more vigorously in the increasingly popular concept of black capitalism, championed by the leaders of the Congress of Racial Equality and other Black Power advocates. If anything, the Poor People's Campaign experience reinforced this direction. The hundreds of Chicagoans who participated in the campaign – the most from one city – witnessed firsthand the limited assistance Congress was willing to provide. Thus, they returned to the city more open to the strategy offered by Breadbasket. People saw the Chicago operation as the embodiment of King's ideals, said Calvin Morris, Breadbasket's associate director for three years. "It unleashed a kind of new spirit of boldness here," he said, adding, "One of my regrets was our inability to really have the kind of apparatus to put those kind of people to work and hold them. We were just swamped with people. Breadbasket meetings, Saturday mornings, just exploded."¹²⁷ Attendance at the organization's weekly Saturday morning gatherings – part meeting, part worship service – had jumped from hundreds to more than 3,000 in the period after King's death.

After a spring in which most staffers and many community participants devoted themselves to mobilizing people and raising funds for the Poor People's Campaign, Breadbasket planned to capitalize on this enthusiasm and launched a new series of negotiations with local retailers regarding their employment of blacks. In the previous twelve months, Breadbasket had negotiated a gain of nearly 3,000 jobs worth \$17 million

¹²⁶ Jesse L. Jackson memo to staff and fellow ministers, September 1968, in *Chicago 1966*, ed. Garrow, 306, emphasis original.

¹²⁷ Calvin Morris, interview by author.

from grocery chains and milk and soft drink companies represented in Chicago. Not all had complied with their Breadbasket agreements, and a review concluded that the A&P food chain had been one of the worst in meeting its goals and working in good faith with the community. In a coordinated effort on July 6, 1968, white and black Breadbasket supporters began picketing their neighborhood A&P stores in inner-city and suburban areas, eventually bringing company executives back to the table to negotiate “the most comprehensive covenant Operation Breadbasket had ever designed,” agreeing to hire black businessmen to oversee closely the company’s training and employment programs from the inside.¹²⁸ It would be Breadbasket’s most clear-cut success, as the company surpassed expectations. Negotiations with other stores proved more problematic. Many did not meet the negotiated job totals, while new talks stalled with both Walgreens drug store and Red Rooster food stores, the latter a particularly bad actor only found in the poorest of neighborhoods and accused of painting meat and other offenses. Red Rooster went bankrupt before agreeing to anything.¹²⁹

By the beginning of 1969, Breadbasket had expanded its scope programmatically, a move that had the potential to widen its opportunities to work with other advocates of the poor, but also risked blurring the organization’s focus. At the heart of it was a somewhat paradoxical move that included tenets of cultural nationalism and “black socialism,” the latter espoused by Ralph Abernathy and the national SCLC. In December 1968, Jackson

¹²⁸ Gary Massoni, “Perspectives on Operation Breadbasket,” in *Chicago 1966*, ed. Garrow, 220-221.

¹²⁹ *Jet*, August 8 and October 24, 1968; *Southern Patriot*, October 1968; Massoni, “Perspectives,” 218-221, 232-234; and Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 133, 141-143.

spearheaded Black Christmas, a holiday spectacle with a ninety-float parade, a black Santa Claus-like figure from the South Pole, and strong encouragement to patronize only black-owned businesses. Its ability to attract 80,000 parade-watchers and many more shoppers validated the concept, which was soon followed in 1969 by Black Easter – featuring a black lamb and passion play – and what became an annual trade fair called Black Expo. Undoubtedly, both materialism and a form of separatism were on display amid the floats bedecked in the black, red, and green of the Ghanaian flag. Yet the black Soul Saint also brought gifts not of “toys or sugar plums but ‘love, justice, peace, and power,’ ” and in the spring of 1969, Breadbasket spent tremendous energy defending recipients of the decidedly less capitalist government welfare state.¹³⁰

Scholars often portray Jesse Jackson as a black capitalist, especially in contrast to the democratic socialism articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy in the late 1960s.¹³¹ Securing jobs for blacks remained the policy focus of Breadbasket, through negotiations with individuals and vigorous support for black labor in the construction industry, the Chicago Transit Authority, and other areas. But the organization also lent its voice to the welfare debates of the era, complicating any label placed on Jackson. Building on relationships established during recruitment for the Poor People’s Campaign, Breadbasket representatives ratcheted up their welfare rights rhetoric in February 1969.

¹³⁰ *Jet*, January 23, October 23, and December 25, 1969, and January 1, 1970; *New York Times*, April 7, 1969; Richard Levine, “Jesse Jackson: Heir to Dr. King?” *Harpers* (March 1969): 69-70; Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 164-168; and Thomas H. Landess and Richard M. Quinn, *Jesse Jackson and the Politics of Race* (Ottawa, Illinois: Jameson Books, 1985), 48-49.

¹³¹ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 303-304; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 394; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 585.

Alongside members of the Uptown community's JOIN, the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO), and other activist groups, Breadbasket leaders warned city and county officials that "a dangerous climax would result from the crisis in welfare if 'county commissioners continue responding only to those with money and property, disregarding the poor and needy.'" ¹³²

Echoing the theme of hunger used by SCLC since Solidarity Day a year before, Breadbasket in May and June spearheaded statewide protests and marches for a "human subsidy" bill "as an emergency measure to deal quickly and constructively with the problems of the poor and the hungry in this state."¹³³ Armed with hundreds of marchers, sharp-tongued rhetoric, and a 200-voice choir and band, Breadbasket took its "Hunger is a Hurtin' Thing" tour throughout downstate Illinois. But unlike in Washington, where Abernathy received a tepid response from Congress and the Nixon administration, the thousands of Breadbasket-mobilized protesters that made it to the steps of the Illinois Statehouse persuaded the governor and legislature to act, according to observers at the time. Legislators dropped consideration of millions of dollars in welfare cuts, while Breadbasket took credit for the state's creation of a free school lunch program. Even after setting its sights on expanding construction job opportunities for African Americans, as part of a larger effort by the Coalition for United Community Action (CUCA) in the summer and fall of 1969,

¹³² Quote in *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 13, 1969. Also, Gary Massoni, interview by author; and Thomas R. Brooks, "Black Upsurge in the Unions," *Dissent* 17 (1970): 130-133.

¹³³ *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 8, 1969.

Breadbasket remained engaged in issues of welfare and other government programs in the city.¹³⁴

Although sponsoring “hunger hearings” in the city helped build Breadbasket’s credibility among Chicago’s multiethnic poor, the greatest potential for interethnic cooperation and trust may have stemmed from its support for the United Farm Workers’ national boycott against table grapes. On the surface, embracing consumer boycotts advocated by the UFW seemed logical – many of the grocery stores targeted by Operation Breadbasket also sold non-union label grapes. “We joined in the grape boycotts in the city and around the state,” recalled Calvin Morris. “There was an identification ... with what Mexicans were going through.”¹³⁵ Not only did the farm workers’ poverty strike a nerve among many blacks, but so did the migrant experience. As late as the mid-1970s, migrant farm workers in the East remained predominantly African American and many black activists were just one generation removed from such work. But, as César Chávez’s reluctance to participate in the PPC also proved, the relationship between Breadbasket and UFW proved far more complicated than the presumed black-brown alliance it suggested.¹³⁶

Despite its endorsement of the grape boycott, as well as the UFW lettuce boycott two years later, Breadbasket rarely offered more than rhetorical support, forcing Chicago

¹³⁴ *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 12, July 14, and August 21, 1969; *New York Times*, June 2 and August 16, 1969; *Jet*, July 3, September 4, and October 2 and 9, 1969, and January 22, 1970; *People’s World*, October 4, 1969; and Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 191-193, 195-196. In addition to participating in CUCA, led by SCLC veteran C.T. Vivian, Breadbasket also founded Black Labor Leaders of Chicago.

¹³⁵ Calvin Morris, interview by author.

¹³⁶ *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 14, 1968; *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1970; Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 202-204; and Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997), 200-201.

UFW organizer Eliseo Medina to turn to other groups for more substantive assistance. When Medina arrived in 1967 as a 23-year-old organizer, UFW had armed him with only the name of a postal worker loyal to the union cause, a bag of union buttons, and \$20. From there, Medina built such a successful boycott that Chicago routinely topped lists of cities that were “shut-down” and, in 1969, he subsequently asked for a transfer to an area with more challenges. Even Mayor Daley eventually endorsed the boycott. But to accomplish this, rather than tap into existing civil rights circles such as SCLC, Medina called on the religious and labor communities to organize effective boycotts in a strange town. UFW records show that seemingly every major progressive-leaning white church in the city supported the boycott, as did the most prominent unions, including the autoworkers, steelworkers, meatpackers, and teachers, as well as the Central Trades and Labor Council and the Chicago Federation of Labor and Industrial Union Council. Conspicuously missing were the city’s black labor federation, large Southside churches, and Breadbasket itself. Black luminaries Al Raby, Bob Lucas, and C.T. Vivian had supported the Chicago Citizens Committee to Aid Delano Farm Workers, a fundraising organization operating in 1966, but the records suggest it may have been a short-lived group. Overall, Breadbasket offered Medina supportive rhetoric and occasional radio time during the Saturday morning broadcasts, but as longtime Breadbasket leader Gary Massoni stated it, “I never thought we did enough.”¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Quote by Gary Massoni, interview by author. “Farmworkers-Breadbasket in Historic Alliance,” [1970], SCLC West, Box 5, Folder 34; Eliseo Medina letter to César Chávez, May 10, 1969, and Medina, Chicago boycott monthly expense reports, May 10, June 28, November 29, and December 30, 1969, and February 25 and June 25, 1970, in Box 24, Folder 11, all in UFW Administrative Department, Part I, and John Armendariz letter to Gene Boutilier, November 14, 1966, Box 7, Folder 1, United Farm Worker Organizing Committee papers, UFW; *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1969, and January 11, 2006; and *Daily World*, October 29, 1968, and December 17, 1969.

Yet, as logical and attractive as a black-brown coalition in Chicago might have seemed in the abstract to movement activists, there was actually little to nothing natural about it. Rather, Breadbasket ideology, practical politics, and paternalism dictated the situation and, therefore, made any coalitional progress that much more remarkable. Although Jackson claimed that, “Operation Breadbasket supports the grape strike as if it were our own project,” in reality the organization’s priority was to create black jobs and new buyers for black-made products.¹³⁸ Aiming to empower African Americans in the Chicago area specifically, most of the jobs were professional or service positions in the private sector – a modern version of “self-help,” some critics claimed. In contrast, the UFW boycotts supported the collective bargaining of migrant agricultural workers more than a thousand miles away, which had potentially less immediacy for consumers. More practically, new boycotts outside of the realm of initial negotiation could have voided the carefully worded covenants that Breadbasket made with particular companies. This was usually not worth the risk, especially drawing the ire of the organization’s black business benefactors, which perhaps benefited the most from Breadbasket’s negotiation and boycott program. Breadbasket also risked violating provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 prohibiting secondary boycotts. While UFW trained its activists to carefully distinguish between picketing the products inside a store and the establishment itself, Breadbasket supporters generally were not trained to make the distinction because of a protest model that targeted the store itself. It is not coincidental that in one of the rare instances in which Breadbasket

¹³⁸ Jesse Jackson, interview in *Playboy*, November 1969, <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/9766/jackson.htm>, accessed March 3, 2007.

arrived in force to boycott in the name of grapes, the target, Jewel Tea Stores, was suspected of backsliding on an earlier covenant to hire more blacks. Although Jewel had been a longtime UFW target, since at least July 1968, Breadbasket announced its support a year later when more than 200 people picketed outside of two stores on Chicago's Southside. That contrasted with the handful of people identifying with Breadbasket who joined UFW pickets more regularly – and they were usually white.¹³⁹

Paternalism also played a role in Breadbasket's uneven support for UFW. As demonstrated during the preparation and execution of the Poor People's Campaign, many civil rights activists, especially within SCLC, viewed ethnic Mexican anti-poverty organizing as only possible because of earlier black efforts. Although worthy, the Chicano struggle owed African Americans a great debt for the trail they blazed, believed many activists. César Chávez and others readily acknowledged some black influence, and in Chicago, Latino community leaders, including Medina, saw Jackson as an important potential ally. Yet, they lamented that, time and time again, Jackson did not follow up on promises of coalition-building. Granted, Breadbasket in general rarely followed up on its projects, but some community leaders viewed this oversight as part of a larger problem. LADO founder Obed Lopez attended just one Saturday morning Breadbasket meeting and left after being introduced by Jackson as “one of our little brown brothers.”¹⁴⁰ Compounding this

¹³⁹ *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 26, 1968, and July 16 and August 4, 1969; *Roosevelt Torch*, November 4, 1968; *Lincoln Park Press*, November 20, 1968; *New York Times*, July 9, 1972; Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 150, 172; Mooney and Majka, *Farmers' and Farmworkers' Movements*, 162; and Gary Massoni, interview by author.

¹⁴⁰ Obed Lopez, interview by author.

paternalism was what some called a tendency to show little enthusiasm for any idea or initiative which Breadbasket officials had not hatched or led. Not only did UFW spearhead the grape boycott, Breadbasket embraced the action only after the insistence of Ralph Abernathy and SCLC aides in Atlanta.¹⁴¹ This, of course, was related to Jackson's own ambitions to be "black Chicago's great liberator," as one former colleague put it. "To Jesse that was his divinely ordained status in life," said Nate Clay, a former staff member of Breadbasket's successor, Operation PUSH. "As far as I'm concerned, that's not a point even open for discussion. It was too bad for anyone in Jesse's way."¹⁴²

This style made Jackson extremely effective, however, in assisting African Americans in a city in which most black politicians remained under the thumb of Mayor Richard Daley's machine. "Many black critics of Jackson have denounced him until they became embroiled in trouble, looked around, and found that there was nobody else in sight to run to for help," writes biographer Barbara Reynolds, not uncritical of Jackson herself. "Jackson, a nonbureaucrat, doesn't call a board meeting to study a problem or pass a resolution for him to act. He just runs out the door."¹⁴³ The examples were plentiful. When nobody else would, Jackson stood up for black students being intimidated at the formerly all-white Gage Park High School by appealing to 100 young men to protect them. Breadbasket's Teacher

¹⁴¹ Jackson took similar issue with SCLC's endorsement of Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 presidential election. Levine, "Jesse Jackson," *Harpers*, 67.

¹⁴² Quote in Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie*, 83. Also, César Chávez, "Martin Luther King Jr.: He Showed Us the Way, April 1978," in *The Words of César Chávez*, ed. Jensen and Hammerback; García with Corona, *Memories of Chicano History*, 216; Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie*, 88-94; and Landess and Quinn, *Jesse Jackson and the Politics of Race*, 57-58.

¹⁴³ Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 285.

Division provided a jolt to the student school boycotts in late 1968, as nearly 700 teachers walked out in solidarity. And after the assassination of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, Breadbasket assisted Black Panther-in-hiding Bobby Rush as a liaison with the Afro-American Patrolmen's League to ensure Rush survived his police custody. Such efforts built goodwill, but did not make Jackson a natural coalition-builder between blacks and ethnic Mexicans – or even among blacks themselves.¹⁴⁴

Although Breadbasket had support in all of black Chicago, its constituency remained predominantly from the more politically connected and relatively wealthier South Side. The West Side, in contrast, had far less political or economic clout. Neither working-class white residents nor the increasingly southern-born and -raised blacks that replaced them in the 1950s and 1960s held strategic importance to the Daley machine. Breadbasket had retained some West Side ties from SCLC's 1966 campaign and the ongoing Poor People's Campaign, particularly through community groups like the West Side Organization. But while South Side gangs of young black men such as the Blackstone Rangers (later P Stone Nation) had pledged their assistance to the PPC as Resurrection City marshals and to Breadbasket by supporting direct action efforts in the construction trades and providing security for Jackson, Morris, and other leaders, their counterparts on the West Side kept their distance from Breadbasket. West Side activists in particular saw Breadbasket as too middle class, one tenant union leader calling Jackson "the Booker T. Washington of the late Sixties."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Calvin Morris, interview with author; Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 285; and Dionne Danna, *Something Better for Our Children: Black Organizing in Chicago Public Schools, 1963-1971* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 85-86.

¹⁴⁵ Levine, "Jesse Jackson," *Harpers*, 64.

Instead, West Siders founded their own independent organizations, ones which nobody but they controlled, including one of the nation's most vibrant Black Panther Party chapters under the dynamic leadership of Fred Hampton. Among the first actions taken by the new chapter was reaching out to other marginalized activists – black, poor white, and Latino – especially on the Near West Side and Near North Side.¹⁴⁶

While Breadbasket talked of a multiethnic coalition, the Black Panthers actually achieved it for a time. By avoiding some of the paternalism that plagued SCLC efforts during the Poor People's Campaign and Breadbasket since, the Panthers established greater trust with their white and Latino counterparts. In what Hampton coined the Rainbow Coalition (a name later borrowed by Jesse Jackson), the West Side-based Panthers formed an alliance with two youth gangs – the Young Patriots, who were poor white Appalachian migrants from Uptown and Lincoln Park on the Near North Side; and the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican gang from West Lincoln Park and Humboldt Park on the Near West Side. Rising Up Angry, a group of radical white college students in Logan Square on Northwest Side, also emerged and emulated the Panthers' call for class unity in the pool halls, parks, and

¹⁴⁶ *New York Times*, August 3, 1968 and June 2, 1969; *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 22, 1969; Calvin Morris, interview with author; FBI memo, Chicago, May 10, 1968; Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 210-213; and Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 59-98. Hampton, a onetime NAACP Youth Council president in suburban Maywood, became convinced of the necessity of armed self-defense and that black nationalism did not have to exclude revolutionary alliances with other oppressed peoples. In the wake of King's assassination and the Washington campaign, Hampton thrilled a crowd at a black leadership conference in Chicago, including Bobby Rush and a number of other former members of the city's defunct SNCC chapter, by condemning nonviolence (and Jackson) as outdated. Together with a group of other youth from the East Garfield section of the West Side, Hampton, Rush, and company founded a local chapter of the Black Panthers. Jon Rice, "The World of Illinois Panthers," in *Freedom North*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 50-51, 54.

taverns of the predominantly white and Latino Near North Side. In general, the poor people of that area had demonstrated a willingness to pursue an interethnic organizing model built on mutual respect and the recognition that everyone's issues are not the same. In 1967-1968, both welfare rights and school reform attracted ad-hoc coalitions against the white power structure. The West Side Organization had teamed up with JOIN and the Latin American Defense Organization to protest the denigration bureaucrats inflicted upon welfare beneficiaries. In addition, both African Americans and Latinos staged school walkouts similar to those by ethnic Mexicans in Los Angeles, Denver, and Texas, to challenge the district's desegregation policies. Many of these young activists, punished for their activism, went on to become Panthers or members of other radical groups.¹⁴⁷

Together, the members of the Rainbow Coalition not only served their immediate communities, but also envisioned a larger sea shift in Chicago politics from the "machine" to "All Power to the People."¹⁴⁸ At its height in late 1969, more than a dozen Panther sites on the West and South sides fed about 4,000 children daily – and all without government money. In many ways, the programming of the Young Patriots and Young Lords echoed that of the Panthers, from serving their own free breakfasts and running free health clinics to

¹⁴⁷ Rice, "The World of the Illinois Panthers," 55-58; *Rising Up Angry*, July 1969; *Chicago Tribune*, August 3, 1967; *Chicago American*, July 1, 1967; *The Worker*, September 3, 1967; *Chicago Seed*, Vol. 6, No. 2 [July 1970?]; Danns, *Something Better for Our Children*, 75, 78, 82, 88; David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1993), 228-229; and Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 199-206. The Panthers and LADO also lent their support to the city's small American Indian population, which periodically protested the treatment of Indians by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and local government. *Chicago Tribune*, March 24, 1970.

¹⁴⁸ *Rising Up Angry*, July 1969.

building “people’s parks” and just being advocates for regular folks. The Young Lords also made a name for themselves by successfully opposing urban renewal efforts in West Lincoln Park, where middle-class housing would have displaced many poor Puerto Ricans and ethnic Mexicans. In one daring move, the Young Lords, under the auspices of the multiethnic Poor People’s Coalition of Lincoln Park, took over the administration building of the McCormick Theological Seminary to protest that institution’s complicity in the community’s urban renewal. And all joined grassroots groups such as LADO to stand up to the local welfare bureaucracy. “When we talk about oppression – and it’s the same for the Patriots, Panthers, and the Young Lords – we’re talking about the essentials: food, decent housing, adequate clothing,” said Art Turco, a white attorney and co-founder, with North Carolina native William “Preacherman” Festerman, of the Young Patriots’ national party. “... In order to help solve the basic needs of the people, you have to go to the people, speak with them, live with them, become one of them.”¹⁴⁹

To at least some observers, the rhetoric of the Rainbow Coalition reminded them of the best of the Poor People’s Campaign, especially the experience many had in the Hawthorne School. Charles Cheng, assistant to the Washington, D.C., teachers union, saw the Chicago alliance’s roots squarely in the Washington campaign:

¹⁴⁹ Quote in *People’s World*, November 29, 1969. Also, *People’s World*, June 7, 1969; *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 11, 18, 1969; *Chicago Today*, May 15, 1969; Obed Lopez, interview by author; Rice, “The World of the Illinois Panthers,” 58; *Rising Up Angry*, July and August 1969; *Chicago Seed*, Vol. 6, Nos. 11, 13 [May, July 1971?]; Johanna Fernandez, “Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City,” in *Freedom North*, ed. Theoharis and Woodard, 258-260; and Frost, ‘*An Interracial Movement of the Poor*,’ 170.

We do see Orientals, and Puerto Ricans, and blacks these days doing things together. The Panthers are an example – what is it, the Patriots, a southern white group who had formed an alliance. If you carefully read the Poor People's Campaign you'll see that that's where a lot of this began.¹⁵⁰

Certainly many such links were indirect at best, and just as many folks returned to their previous lives in Chicago as became activists in even a small way, through Breadbasket, the Rainbow Coalition, or something else. Yet just as Highlander West in New Mexico had, the potential of Chicago captured the imagination of many, including Myles Horton and the staff of the Highlander Center. During the next several years after the Washington campaign, Highlander remained in constant touch with Chicago activists Horton had met at Resurrection City and subsequently ran workshops in Tennessee and Chicago. At various times, the Young Lords' Cha Cha Jiménez and Omar Lopez, LADO's Obed Lopez, the Young Patriots' Bill Festerman and Doug Youngblood, and the Uptown Coalition's Chuck Geary and Peggy Terry all attended Highlander events. Most of these people had gone to Washington in 1968. And the 1970 multiethnic poor workshop featured black, white, and Puerto Rican members of the Rainbow Coalition, as well as folks from the Southwest and Deep South.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Charles Cheng, interview by Malika Lumumba.

¹⁵¹ Myles Horton, report, February 1970, and Horton letter to Kay Boyle, February 16, 1970, Folder 15; Horton letter to Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, May 6, 1971, and Horton, Chicago report, September 15-28, 1969, and October 23-28, 1970, Folder 11; Horton, Chicago report, February 21-22, 1971, and Conrad Browne letter to Charles Geary, January 19, 1971, Folder 18, all in Box 101; and Horton, Chicago Field Report, August 3, 1969, Horton letters to William Festerman, October 7, 1969, and to Cha Cha Jimenez, October 9, 1969, Folder 19; Horton letter to Rev. Harold Smith, January 29, 1970, Folder 21, all in Box 109, all in HREC.

Not surprisingly, the white political establishment – and elements of the black establishment, for that matter – viewed the Rainbow Coalition as a grave threat, and reacted accordingly. Police harassment, especially in Chicago, had targeted quasi-gang organizations such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords frequently – and had become the source of considerable ridicule in the pages of the city’s underground press, such as *Rising Up Angry*. Activists were convinced that the coalition’s existence – yet another sign of successful community organizing – made them even more vulnerable. In the first half of 1969, for instance, the Panthers and their allies withstood constant harassment, from questionable charges to unannounced raids in which Panther offices were ransacked, posters ripped down, food for the breakfast program ruined, and files taken. JOIN, LADO, WSO, and the Urban Coalition all had had similar experiences in the previous year. But as bad as such actions were, none prepared Chicago’s Panthers for the December 1969 murders of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Despite initial police claims to the contrary, forensic investigations demonstrated that Hampton and Clark had been sleeping when officers opened fire on Hampton’s apartment; all but one out of nearly one hundred rounds fired were from outside of the building. Police informers inside the Panthers provided essential information on the apartment’s layout and Hampton’s daily routines. The murders sparked outrage from many quarters, including calls for a Justice Department investigation and other independent inquiries, and at first, it appeared to have unified black opposition to Daley and the machine. But it turned out that Hampton’s murder also had the desired effect by casting a pall over much of the city’s interethnic organizing as well as weakening the Rainbow Coalition’s members. Programming such as free breakfasts and health clinics continued.

But the nation's increasingly conservative law and order climate, one that condoned the constant police surveillance, intimidation, and infiltration of not only self-described radical organizations, but also progressive ones such as the American Friends Service Committee, sowed substantial distrust among activists. In the wake of Fred Hampton's death, activists questioned everyone's motivations, with paralyzing results.¹⁵²

Despite their differences in strategy, Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy were among the first to condemn Fred Hampton's murder. Both spoke at Hampton's funeral, with Abernathy warning a crowd that ranged from machine alderman Ralph Metcalfe to at least fifty members of the P Stone Nation, "I need not remind you that we are all tied in that same bond of mutuality."¹⁵³ Hampton's death also reaffirmed Jackson as the best-known black critic of the Daley machine, and in 1971, he attempted to use this platform in an abortive mayoral challenge to Richard Daley. Unlike Andrew Young, Jackson did not resign from SCLC when his flirtation with electoral politics became a serious endeavor. Instead, he maintained his control over Breadbasket and its resources and programming, while gathering signatures and fundraising promises for a campaign bid.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² *Black Panther*, May 19, 1969; *Rising Up Angry*, July and August 1969, and Mid-Winter, Early Spring and Summer 1970; *Jet*, December 18 and 25, 1969; Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers and the Police, *Search and Destroy: A Report*, chairmen Roy Wilkins and Ramsey Clark (New York: Metropolitan Applied Research Center, 1973); Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie*, 19; and Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 209-222. The Chicago Police Department's Red Squad files, available at the Chicago Historical Society, reveal a remarkable amount of surveillance and infiltration in the cities' progressive and radical organizations.

¹⁵³ *Jet*, December 25, 1969.

¹⁵⁴ *New York Times*, December 11, 1969; Calvin Morris, interview by author; *Jet*, December 25, 1969; Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 15, 221-228; and Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie*, 89.

What Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 called Jackson's "little empire" simply had become too much for Abernathy and SCLC to tolerate.¹⁵⁵ "When we put Jesse in charge of the boycott operation," stated Andrew Young, "it was ... so we could hit thirty or forty cities simultaneously. ... But Jesse could never get out of Chicago to do it."¹⁵⁶ Breadbasket had some success in other cities, most notably New York, Cleveland, and Los Angeles, but that was not Jackson's priority. In late 1971, the feud between King's close friend and successor and the man who believed he should be the true heir – and persuaded the media as such – came to a head. After alleged financial improprieties from Black Expo 1971 gave Abernathy an excuse to rein him in by ordering Breadbasket moved to Atlanta, Jackson resigned. For the Chicago minister, little changed other than the name of his organization, to People United to Save Humanity (PUSH). But for SCLC, the split represented a blow more devastating than Resurrection City's fall four years earlier. Cut off from its Northern financial base in Chicago and rejected by its most charismatic if flawed spokesman, SCLC lost its voice among the more dynamic ones of the early 1970s. If SCLC had embraced a different sort of organizing, represented by Coretta Scott King, the welfare rights mothers, the scattered activities the PPC helped spawn among ethnic Mexicans, or a truly national form of Breadbasket, perhaps the organization born out of the Montgomery bus boycott could have reinvented itself enough to remain relevant. But it did not.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 444.

¹⁵⁶ Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 139.

¹⁵⁷ *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 31, 1969; *Jet*, December 4, 1969, and March 26 and May 7, 1970; Reynolds, *Jesse Jackson*, 140, 324-325, 347-355; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 396-397.

* * *

Although scholars point to the Poor People's Campaign as the beginning of the end of SCLC, and often the civil rights movement, the reality of the moment was far more complex. The exchanges begun in Resurrection City, in the Hawthorne School, and in the streets of Washington continued long after Ralph Abernathy left jail for the last time. While SCLC opened new fronts of the campaign in Atlanta, Charleston, and Chicago, ethnic Mexican, white, and American Indian activists took their new contacts, resources, and a lesson or two back home with them – whether that was northern New Mexico or urban Denver, eastern Tennessee or rural Montana. For the most part, their efforts did not lead to grand, dramatic events; the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference was an exception. Instead the result was “slow and respectful work,” in which lives were changed one person at a time. Ironically, the campaign in Washington expanded the horizons of poor people and their allies chiefly by reminding them that the search for economic justice not only began in their communities but also ultimately ended there, at home. That is where the battles of the 1970s would be fought.

Epilogue

*“It was the coalition forged in the late ’60s and early ’70s
that ... brought Harold ultimately to power.”*

- Marilyn Katz, press manager for Harold Washington, Chicago’s first black mayor ¹

The 1970s saw several of the most prominent leaders of the Poor People’s Campaign fade from the scene. Blaming Ralph Abernathy for the organization’s increasing irrelevance to the national civil rights scene, SCLC officials in 1976 forced out King’s successor and best friend. While his ouster did not restore SCLC to its former luster, Abernathy faced further ostracization in the following years after endorsing Ronald Reagan for president in 1980 despite the conservative Republican’s use of states’ rights rhetoric. After serving federal and state jail terms stemming from Tierra Amarilla charges, Reies López Tijerina continued to pursue land rights for people of Mexican descent, as well as encourage interracial unity through a series of “brotherhood conferences.” But while he kept the Alianza going into the early 1980s, its grassroots influence had waned long before, especially after Tijerina began issuing increasingly strange petitions to the newly crowned king of Spain on behalf of land rights. Corky Gonzales’ influence also declined during the decade, although the Crusade for Justice survived as a non-profit organization, including its flourishing Escuela Tlatelolco, into the twenty-first century. Increasing federal and local police repression of the Crusade’s activities, including its ties to the American Indian Movement, exacerbated internal disputes

¹ Frost, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor*, 170.

over finances and organizational direction. By the late 1970s, the Crusade had become marginalized even in Denver's ethnic Mexican community. The Brown Berets, weakened by police suppression and charges of sexism, met a similar fate.²

Other key sponsors of the campaign met similar fates. The National Welfare Rights Organization, after nearly achieving the establishment of a guaranteed income maintenance program in 1970-1971, declined quickly as anti-welfare forces gained an upper hand during the economic crises of the 1970s and many of the movement's veterans, including executive director George Wiley, left the organization. Financial backing for NWRO collapsed after Johnnie Tillmon replaced Wiley, a black male professional with enormous fundraising skills and contacts. A final blow, perhaps, was Wiley's death less than a year later in a boating accident. Two predominantly white organizations, the American Friends Service Committee and the Highlander Center, continued their efforts during the decade and beyond. But their reach shrunk considerably without the sort of powerful and reliable African American and ethnic Mexican partners that they had during the heyday of the movement.³

Yet grassroots organizing and social justice mobilization did not end with the decline of a handful of men or organizations – just as it did not end after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., the disorganization of the Poor People's Campaign, or the election of President Richard Nixon. Rather, activism took on different forms in the 1970s and even the 1980s,

² Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 580-585, 591-593; Busto, *King Tiger*, 69-72; Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice*, 288-305, 347-379; and Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!* 58-59. See also materials on the Statewide, National, and Continental Brotherhood Awareness Conferences, 1972-1976, in Box 32, Folders 21-41, RLT.

³ Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*, 167-169, 177-181.

despite the increasing entrenchment of conservative rhetoric and policy – and at times, because of it. This generally unexplored era of grassroots activism in the 1970s is just beginning to find its scholars, both in complicating our understanding of the Left, but also in terms of the New Right.⁴ And in much of the scholarship, the nuanced legacies of the movements themselves have become clearer.

The cultural and political awareness championed by Chicano activists, for instance, translated into real – albeit uneven – electoral gains, just as voting rights and the reduction of racial terror in the South transformed opportunities for African Americans. Thus, electoral politics on the local level remained both a movement legacy *and* one sustainable form of bottom-up activism. While this often resulted in identity politics, it was also in this realm that modest but symbolically important gains in interethnic cooperation took place. In particular, the multiethnic coalitions that propelled Harold Washington, Federico Peña and, to a lesser extent, Tom Bradley into City Hall in Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles, respectively, were substantive examples of blacks and Latinos finding common cause, at least for a time. Jesse Jackson’s broad Rainbow Coalition presidential campaign in 1988 took this, if ever so briefly, to the national level. And although not explicitly partisan, Ernesto Cortes’ Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in San Antonio offered an interethnic

⁴ On grassroots activism in Black Power, see footnote 10 in Chapter Six. On the Chicano movement, see Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!*; Oropeza *¡Raza Sí, Guerra No!*; and Rodríguez, “Migrants and Citizens.” And for grassroots conservatism, see Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1940-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Matthew J. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

model for the revival of Industrial Areas Foundation organizations across the country in the 1980s.⁵

Most of the folks involved in the Poor People's Campaign did not play prominent roles in these later alliances. With the exception of Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH in Chicago and Crusade for Justice members who campaigned for Federico Peña, many participants found smaller but just as important ways to contribute to their communities outside of the limelight. Carlos Montes returned to Los Angeles and became a labor organizer and then a peace activist against the Iraq War. Juanita Dominguez, Craig Hart, Alicia Escalante, Miguel Bárragan, and Cornelius Givens led or founded government anti-poverty agencies and non-profit organizations. Maria Varela also helped found community development organizations, such as the land grant-oriented La Cooperativa and Ganados Del Valle, as well as became a writer and lecturer. Ernesto Vigil also turned to research and writing, while Bernard Lafayette earned a doctorate and began to teach workshops on peace and nonviolent change. Leo Nieto, Willie Bolden, and Bert Ransome continued to minister to the less fortunate. Vic Charlo founded a school on his reservation in Montana and wrote

⁵ Paul Kleppner, *Chicago Divided: The Making of a Black Mayor* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985), 219-222, 229, 239, 247; Rivlin, *Fire on the Prairie*, 378-379; Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 65-67, 125-126; Sheila D. Collins, *The Rainbow Challenge: The Jackson Campaign and the Future of U.S. Politics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), 173; Carlos Muñoz Jr. and Charles Henry, "Rainbow Coalitions in Four Big Cities: San Antonio, Denver, Chicago and Philadelphia," *PS* 19 (Summer 1986): 598-609; and Raphael J. Sonenshein, "Post-Incorporation Politics in Los Angeles," and Rodney E. Hero and Susan E. Clarke, "Latinos, Blacks, and Multiethnic Politics in Denver: Realigning Power and Influence in the Struggle for Equality," in *Racial Politics in American Cities*, ed. Browning, Marshall, and Tabb, 55-56, 316.

poetry. And countless others returned home to make a difference in the lives of their families and communities, sometimes in ways only they themselves can comprehend.

Yet, cumulatively, such organizing made a difference in recognizable ways. In just one example, Marilyn Katz, press manager for Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, says: “It was the coalition forged in the late ’60s and early ’70s that ... brought Harold ultimately to power.”⁶ She was talking specifically about the complicated, careful coalition-building among blacks, whites, and Latinos in Chicago’s Uptown – a long-term phenomenon that incorporated a variety of efforts including the PPC. But it also underscores a certain interconnectedness among seemingly disparate organizing, and the importance of experiences such as those weeks and months in the spring of 1968 in Washington. Those men and women who participated in the campaign took part in a noble multiethnic experiment – an experiment that demonstrated both the potential of and the considerable obstacles to productive interethnic coalition-building. Clearly, the Poor People’s Campaign cannot be considered a success in any conventional sense. But nor should it be dismissed as an inconsequential failure. Rather, the campaign remains a complicated moment in one of the most important years in U.S. history – a turning point in how political actors tackled interethnic organizing and class-based politics in an emerging age of identity politics. Recognizing the fluidity and complexity between success and failure, black and white, and so many other binaries we as scholars and citizens take for granted, will help historians better comprehend the social movements of the recent past. And as Americans tackle new social

⁶ Frost, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor*, 170.

justice struggles in the twenty-first century, such as the immigrant rights movement, an acknowledgement of the complicated nature of such coalition-building better equips us to understand the challenges ahead.

Appendix

Brief timeline of Washington phase of PPC

December 4, 1967	Martin Luther King Jr. formally announces campaign
February 1968	SCLC board, NWRO endorse campaign
March 14	Minority Group Conference held in Atlanta
March 18	King first speaks in Memphis
March 28	Riot mars King march in Memphis
April 4	King assassinated, violence erupts in capital
April 29-30	Committee of 100 presents demands in Washington
May 2	March to Washington begins in Memphis
May 12	Mother's Day parade led by Coretta Scott King
May 13	Ralph Abernathy drives in first stake in Resurrection City
May 17	Western caravan leaves Los Angeles
May 23	Western caravan arrives in capital, moves to Hawthorne
May 29	Protest outside of Supreme Court building
June 1	Appalachian whites picket Senator Byrd's house
June 3	Protest at Justice Department
June 5	Robert F. Kennedy assassinated
June 7	Bayard Rustin quits as Solidarity Day coordinator
June 12	Vigil starts outside Department of Agriculture
June 15	Puerto Ricans hold Washington rally
June 19	Solidarity Day march

June 24	Resurrection City falls, Abernathy arrested
June 25	Poor People's Embassy founded at Hawthorne
July 13	Abernathy leaves jail
July 20	Tijerina returns to New Mexico

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Biography

Gordon Keith Mantler was born on January 20, 1972, in Baltimore, Maryland. He graduated with a bachelor of arts in political science in 1994 from the University of South Carolina, where he was also Phi Beta Kappa. After working as a daily newspaper journalist for eight years, he received his master's degree in U.S. history from the University of South Florida in 2002. He received his doctorate in U.S., African American, and Latino history from Duke University in 2008. His honors include a Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.