May: The Poor People’s Campaign

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the freedom movement became increasingly involved in issues of economic justice for all the poor in America. While the passage of the two acts was crucial to developing a more equitable society, civil rights activists all over America recognized that it was not enough to ensure the civil and voting rights of the poor if they did not have the economic resources to pursue their rights. As long as the poor were trapped in overcrowded, substandard housing, attended inferior schools, and could not find work, all the legislation in the world was for naught.

In 1964 the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson declared war on poverty. Although the effort to identify the poor and study how the government could help them begun during the Kennedy administration, it became one of Johnson’s favorite causes. The president knew about poverty having grown up in Texas hill country; during the Great Depression, he taught in a school where the students were primarily brown and black and very poor.

In 1964 Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act and allocated one billion dollars in pursuit of wiping out poverty. That budget, however, was nowhere near what needed to be spent, and increasingly the War on Poverty was being squeezed out by the war in Vietnam. To address the issue, the Southern Christian Leadership Congress (SCLC) developed a campaign designed to bring a nonviolent demonstration of poor people of all races to descend on Washington to confront the government. The plan also included a thirty million-dollar budget that would pay for additional low-income housing, a guaranteed wage, and assurance by Congress that there would be a pledge to full employment.
During early 1968 King crisscrossed the country to drum up support for the poor. It was a herculean task; not all of the established civil rights groups agreed with the program. Some did not like the pledge of nonviolence; others wanted a more radical program. Furthermore, it was no surprise that the many detractors of Dr. King were vehemently opposed to such an undertaking. Government officials from the south responded with scathing criticism of the march and Dr. King. Care had to be taken to ensure that the poor were not just represented by urban blacks and welfare recipients who had come to be the new picture of the poor. Still, a number of peace and justice groups supported the plan.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who had been spying on King since 1962 Kennedy administration stepped up their efforts to discredit King and disrupt the demonstration. J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, hated Dr. King. He went so far as to develop black informants through the Ghetto Informant Program (GIP) and charged them with the task of destabilizing the effort and smearing King.

The program was intended to start in mid-May. Amidst the planning, King was helping striking garbage workers in Memphis in the fight for better wages and working conditions. He was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

King’s dear friend and jail companion, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, inherited the direction of the SCLC. While Abernathy was an excellent assistant to Dr. King, he lacked the gravitas needed to replace him. However, at a retreat on April 16 and 17, the organization resolved to go on with the march. The scope of the march changed, though. It was decided that the program would create and maintain a tent city on the Washington Mall in which the participants would live. They would fan out across Washington on a daily basis to buttonhole members of Congress and various federal agencies to support their program.
King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, led a demonstration that was the beginning of a two-week plan to pressure Congress. Simultaneously, almost a dozen groups from across the company began the trek to Washington. Thousands of them constructed what came to be known as Resurrection City. The SCLC also agreed to limit the number of residents living there to three thousand people, and planned to stay for a little over a month.

There were a number of problems. Resurrection City residents were poor and, for the most part, lacked a sense of political efficacy. Spirits were quickly dampened at the daunting challenge that had been set. There were quarrels over leadership; many were angry because Rev. Abernathy did not live in Resurrection City. There was crime, some of it major. The biracial nature of the demonstration caused tension. Washington was deluged by rain for days, and conditions in the camp deteriorated. Demonstrators had little success meeting with members of Congress, and many people gave up and left early.

There was still tremendous tension in Washington. Riots had broken out after the murder of Dr. King and federal troops were deployed. On June 23 there was vandalism near the camp. Police sprayed tear gas and sealed off the area. The mayor of Washington, D.C., Walter Washington, called a state of emergency and the National Guard was activated. Capitol police arrived on June 24 and began clearing the camps. They searched tents and made almost three hundred arrests. Resurrection City was dismantled.

Further Reading
