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OPINION

Martin Luther King Jr. and Passing the Baton

Reviving an anti-poverty crusade

BY MARC H. MORIAL

"We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists." — Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

It is near universally known that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream. For the most part, that dream is closely tied to his courageous work around racial inequality and injustice. This dream conjures up images of little black boys and girls joining hands with little white boys and girls as brothers and sisters.

But Dr. King had another dream. It was a dream of economic justice for all of our nation's poor. Tragically cut down by an assassin's bullet before the start of the new Poor People's Campaign, Dr. King would not live to see the launch of his dream for economic justice. Fifty years later, as the baton passes from the legacy of Dr. King



to the leadership of Rev. William J. Barber II, the poor of our nation have another advocate to fight on their behalf.

Rev. Barber is no stranger to social justice movements centered on fighting for the poor and the most vulnerable. During his time as the president of the NAACP's North Carolina chapter, Rev. Barber led "Moral Mondays" protests at the North Carolina state house. His coalition of protesters transcended race, socio-economic or ideological divides. They were united in a multi-issue struggle, mirroring the kind of coalition Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy envisioned for the Poor People's Campaign a half century ago.

The conditions of poverty that spurred Dr. King to action in 1968 continue to motivate Dr. Barber in 2018. According to the latest census figures, more than 40 million Americans live below the federal poverty line today. During Dr. King's time, 35 million Americans lived in poverty. While the latest job figures show that racial gaps in employment are slowly closing, yawning income inequality and the consolidation of wealth at the top of the economic food chain remain stubborn fixtures of our top-one-percent centric economy.

Dr. King spoke of "the presence of a kind of social insanity which could lead us to national ruin" in 1968. Today, we are

bracing for the impact of the regressive Tax Reform law—legislation that permanently cuts taxes for corporations, but offers this relief temporarily for middle and working-class Americans. Members of Congress pushed hard to give tax cuts and breaks to the wealthiest Americans, but have not found the same political will to fund the Children's Health Insurance Program, leaving millions of American children at risk of losing vital healthcare coverage.

Politically, our country is a far cry from the "war on poverty" declared by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964, when the federal government's priority was "not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it." Today, as we watch the social safety net is systematically unraveled beneath our feet, it is clear that we are fighting a targeted war on the poor.

For thousands, that fight will be fought under the banner of "The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival," led by Revs. Barber and Liz Theoharis. The agenda is "to challenge the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation and the nation's distorted morality" with close to five weeks of action at statehouses around our country and at our nation's capital.

We in the Urban League Movement were privileged to engage with Rev. Barber and

discuss his mission and vision first-hand when he spoke at our 2017 Conference in St. Louis. His address left us energized and inspired to continue the work of my predecessor, Whitney M. Young, who worked hand-in-hand with King and other leaders of the era as executive director of the primary civil rights organization dedicated to economic empowerment.

The work of the Poor People's Campaign culminated with a Poor People's March on Washington shortly after Dr. King's assassination, and a six-week occupation of the Washington Mall by march participants and advocates. With campaign's revival soon upon us, it is clear that the spirit of 1968 is alive and well—and its spirit has a newfound home in Washington.

I was recently honored with an invitation to discuss Dr. King's economic justice dream at the new exhibit of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, "City of Hope: Resurrection City & the 1968 Poor People's Campaign." We stood among the relics and pictures of past but felt very connected to our struggles in the present. Dr. King's struggle remains our nation's struggle, and we must continue to move towards equality and economic justice for all.

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Handicapping African-American Progress for Decades

A war of ideas between black folk and white liberals

BY OSCAR H. BLAYTON

In January of 1963, I was in my senior year at my all-Black high school and required to take a course in U.S. Government. Our teacher was a World War II veteran who was also the basketball coach with an easy-going manner. We spent more time discussing current events than dead presidents and supreme court justices.



The most recent civil rights demonstration was usually the topic of discourse. But one day, in the middle of that month, our teacher asked the class if we knew who Malcolm X was. Every hand in the room went up. But when asked to explain who he was, few of us were able to say more than he was a "Black Muslim" and that he had once been in prison.

Two weeks earlier Malcolm had led a demonstration at New York County's Criminal Court Building, in Manhattan, protesting police hostility toward two Nation of Islam Muslims who had been selling Muhammad Speaks newspapers in Times Square on Christmas Day. This demonstration received national attention

and 30 years later was portrayed in Spike Lee's film bearing Malcolm X's name. But as a 17-year-old high school student at the time, I had not been paying much attention.

A few weeks later, Malcolm led a demonstration of 230 Muslims in Times Square, protesting police brutality. America was now paying even more attention to Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. The immediate response from white America was that the Nation of Islam was subversive and dangerous, a fringe group led by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X that preached a hatred of all white people.

But a year earlier, in 1962, Malcolm had been speaking less about the racially skewed teachings of Elijah Muhammad and had begun getting more involved in seeking civil rights and justice for African Americans. But the damage had been done. The worst of Malcolm X's words were weaponized against him and he was declared as being beyond redemption. By the time of his assassination in February 1965, he had been condemned as an anathema to America and its values. This was a view held by conservatives, most liberals and many Blacks.

In January 1999, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp in honor of Malcolm X.

Malcolm could not have changed from the time of his assassination until his being honored by the Postal Service. He was dead. What had changed was America. It became clear to our nation that the wrongs

and injustices against which Malcolm fought were real and his struggle had virtue. Despite his offensive words in his earlier career, Malcolm sought to make America a better place.

In recent weeks, news has surfaced that Barack Obama stood for a photograph in 2005 with Minister Louis Farrakhan, the current leader of the Nation of Islam. The overheated reaction by numerous white liberals to this revelation is reminiscent of the reaction to Malcolm X 50 years ago. This inability of these white liberals to contextualize Malcolm X within the American fabric in 1965 and Louis Farrakhan in 2018 reveals a daunting problem that has handicapped the progress of African Americans for many decades. Too many white liberals want to make Black folk in their own image. In the mental construct of the world they wish to create there is a place for Black folk, but not Black folk like Malcolm X or Louis Farrakhan.

To some white liberals, the Malcolms and the Farrakhans are wrinkles in the American fabric that must be removed if a future liberal America is to be smooth. But those wrinkles have been created by centuries of racism, both in the U.S. and abroad and they cannot be removed without destroying the fabric itself.

Too many white liberals see African Americans as two-dimensional cutouts that can be disbursed throughout a liberal America. Our presence would be devoid of our history of slavery, Jim Crow and

modern-day oppression and the social complexities which they have created. Our presence would also be disconnected from other oppressed people of the world. In a word, our presence would be non-threatening to the preferred world order of most white liberals. But that is a white liberal fantasy that cannot exist in a world as complex as ours. It is a flawed national view and a flawed worldview.

One person who typifies the white liberals holding these flawed views is Alan Dershowitz. The Harvard law professor emeritus has championed many liberal causes and shown himself to be deeply concerned with civil rights. Nonetheless, he is reported to have said on Fox News recently that had he known of the Obama – Farrakhan photograph taken in 2005, he would not have supported Obama's presidential bid in 2008.

Citing offensive remarks attributed to Farrakhan about Judaism and Israel, Dershowitz has denounced him as a subversive, un-American anti-Semite.

The problems with Alan Dershowitz's position regarding Obama's taking a picture with Farrakhan are two-fold. First, by associating Obama with Farrakhan's views he is painting with too broad a brush. Many politicians have their pictures taken with individuals with whom they do not agree politically or ideologically. In 2005, Farrakhan, as a resident of Illinois, was one of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18