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Where Do We Go From Here?

“There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. Not too many years ago, Dr. Kirtley Mather, a Harvard geologist, wrote a book entitled *Enough and to Spare*. He set forth the basic theme that famine is wholly unnecessary in the modern world. Today, therefore, the question on the agenda must read: Why should there be hunger and privation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with



CHILD WATCH
Marian Wright Edelman

When Dr. King died in 1968 calling for a Poor People's Campaign, there were 25.4 million poor Americans, including 11 million poor children.

the basic necessities of life?”

Forty-five years ago this month, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took a very rare sabbatical at an isolated house in Jamaica far away from telephones and the constant pressures of his life as a very public civil rights leader to write what would become his last book: “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?” The excerpt above feels as though it could have been written yesterday. Professor Mather's book arguing that mankind had achieved the ability to move beyond famine was published in 1944, but in 2012, despite nearly seventy more years of unparalleled advances both in scientific and technological capability and in global resources and wealth, hunger and want are still rampant. Back then Dr. King wrote:

“There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will... The well-off and the secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst. The poor in our countries have been shut out of our minds, and driven from the mainstream of our societies, because we have allowed them to become invisible. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for ‘the least of these.’”

When Dr. King died in 1968 calling for a Poor People's Campaign, there were 25.4 million poor Americans, including 11 million poor children. Today there are more than 46 million Americans living in poverty, including 16.4 million poor children. The question of why we still allow poverty and hunger to exist—and the answer—remain the same: The deficit in human will.

As another political season gets into full swing in the United States, a new crop of candidates are making a lot of promises about their competing visions of America. But how many TV debates are focusing on whether America is a compassionate nation? How many stump speeches are saying how shameful it is that last year more Americans relied on food stamps to eat than at any time since the program began in 1939? How many are responding to Occupy Wall Street's outcry about the morally obscene gulf between rich and poor in our nation where the 400 highest income earners made as much as the combined tax revenues of 22 states in 2008? Which PACs are running commercials to remind Americans that

we are normalizing poverty, child hunger, and homelessness, and creating historic income, wealth, and mobility gaps that threaten to destroy the American dream? If the qualification for individual and national greatness is genuine concern for the ‘least of these,’ too many of our political leaders and citizens are failing.

As our nation pauses for the national holiday celebrating Dr. King's birthday, I hope we will not spend it just listening to speeches praising Dr. King but instead will heed and act on his words.

When will we hear what Dr. King declared in 1967—“the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty”—and work to win the first victory right here at home in the richest nation on earth? Is it possible to overcome our deficit in human will, or is the fact that we have already squandered so much time and still have so far to go a reason to give up?

Dr. King's voice guides us if we are willing to take the next step and use it as a road map for action. In *Where Do We Go from Here?*, as he reflected on what direction the struggle for civil rights and social justice should take next, he shared a story about the need to commit to difficult struggles for the long haul. Dr. King described a flight he had taken from New York to London years earlier in an older propeller airplane. The trip took nine and a half hours, but on the way home, the crew announced the flight from

London back to New York would take twelve and a half. When the pilot came out to visit the cabin, Dr. King asked him why. “‘You must understand about the winds,’ he said. ‘When we leave New York, a strong tail wind is in our favor, but when we return, a strong head wind is against us.’ Then he added, ‘Don't worry. These four engines are capable of battling the winds.’”

Dr. King concluded: “In any social revolution there are times when the tail winds of triumph and fulfillment favor us, and other times when strong head winds of disappointment and setbacks beat against us relentlessly. We must not permit adverse winds to overwhelm us as we journey across life's mighty Atlantic; we must be sustained by our engines of courage in spite of the winds. This refusal to be stopped, this ‘courage to be,’ this determination to go on ‘in spite of’ is the hallmark of any great movement.”

Today we need to rev up our engines of courage, battle against the fierce head winds of economic downturn, unemployment, poverty, and greed that threaten to undo the

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progress of the last fifty years, and stay true to the course Dr. King set for us. Now is the time to end child poverty and hunger in America.

Marian Wright Edelman is the President of the Children's Defense Fund.

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