

King's Final Message: Poverty is a Civil Rights Battle

By Stephanie Siek,
CNN

On Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, some will volunteer, some will attend celebrations of his life and legacy, some will do nothing at all. "I have a dream," the title of King's best known speech, will be repeated countless times, along with well-known stories about his commitment to nonviolence, his letters from a Birmingham jail, his marches against segregation and the bullet that ended his life on April 4, 1968.

But few will remember how King lived his last birthday, as he turned 39 on Jan. 15, 1968.

According to accounts of the day retold by Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King III, King spent the day working on a campaign that he hoped would force Washington and the American public to acknowledge and resolve the problem of poverty for people of all races, religions and backgrounds in the United States. The Poor People's Campaign was the agenda for the day, with a short break for birthday cake.

While King's dream, the march on Washington and fight against segregation are well-known to children and adults now, fewer are aware that King spent the last months of his life fighting poverty.

When he died in Memphis, he was there to support fair wages and union representation for Memphis sanitation workers.

Rebecca Burns, who wrote about King's last days, death, and burial in "Burial for a King," said King's antiwar and anti-poverty legacy are overshadowed in part because their solutions are more elusive.

"It's a much more complex issue – it's not, pardon my choice of words, as black and white as voting rights or where you sit on a bus," Burns said. "It's harder to talk about that in sound bites."

Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, said that King's dreams of economic justice remain unrealized, but not because they are impossible to achieve.

"It is easier to celebrate King as a civil rights leader, because that was the easier part of his vision to realize," Carson said. "The southern Jim Crow system was a regional anachronism rather than a national problem - the gulf between rich and poor - that we still prefer to ignore."

The Poor People's Campaign reached out to poor whites, many of whom felt most threatened by the civil rights movement's successes in black equality, as well as improv-

erished migrant farm workers who harvested the nation's food and Native Americans who languished on reservations. Injustice anywhere, King said, was a threat to justice everywhere.

In a speech in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, less than a month before his assassination, King spoke of unemployment statistics that belied the long-term unemployment in the black community. But he made clear that employment was not turning out to be a ticket out of poverty. He made the same point in a number of similar speeches in the months before and after.

"The problem of unemployment is not the only problem," King said. "There is a problem of underemployment, and there are thousands and thousands, I would say millions of people in the Negro community who are poverty-stricken –

might be considered among his most radical: Not only should poverty be eradicated, he argued, but everyone should be guaranteed an income that would prevent them from falling into poverty.

Recently released statistics indicate that decades later, the underemployment and poverty King fought might be just as entrenched.

According to a November 2011 report by the nonprofit Feeding America, which includes a nationwide network of some 200 food banks, one in five of America's children are at risk of not having enough nutritious food to eat. For Hispanic and African-American children, the statistic is one in three.

The prevalence of poverty is higher for minorities – 27.4% of African Americans were living in poverty in 2010, according to Census data. For Latinos, the figure was 26.6%, and for Asians it was 12.1 percent. Nearly 10% of whites lived beneath the poverty line.

Poverty is generally defined as earning \$22,314 per year for a family of four. A person working 40 hours per week at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour earns \$15,080 per year, gross. According to the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, childcare alone can cost anywhere from \$3,582 to \$18,773 per year.

An Indiana University white paper released last Wednesday and prepared at the request of Dr. Cornel West and public television host Tavis Smiley, examined the impact of the recession on poverty and near-poverty in America. "At Risk: America's

Poor During and After the Great Recession," concluded that the number of long-term unemployed between December 2007 and June 2009 was the highest since the government began recording such figures in 1948. "By the third quarter of 2011, 4.4 million people (32% of the 14 million people out of work) informed surveyors that they had been without work for more than a year," the report said.

Using the official federal definition, 15.1% of the population is living in poverty – 46.2 million people. Using a supplemental measure that takes into account the geographical differences in cost of living, the number rises to 16%.

What would King have to say about it?

"Like racism, the problems associated with poverty are like weeds that will spread when left ignored," said Carson, who has spent most of his professional life studying King's writings and speeches. "He would remind us that poverty and economic inequities threaten the future of American democracy."



Any religion which professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a dry-as-dust religion.

not because they are not working, but because they receive wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life of our nation. Most of the poverty-stricken people of America are persons who are working every day, and they end up getting part-time wages for full-time work."

King died before the Poor People's Campaign could form a list of specific goals. But he planned for a march of 2,000 people from across the country to convene in Washington, D.C., meet with officials and demand jobs, fair wages, better education and unemployment benefits.

In May 1968, organizers built a tent city in D.C. and won some minor concessions from the federal government, such as promises that poor people would be allowed leadership roles in the programs aimed at helping them. Although the campaign carried on with help from King's deputies, it faltered without his leadership.

At the time of his death, King was pushing an idea that

CELEBRATION EVENTS

How To Petition the President at "We The People..."

The First Amendment gives all Americans the right to "petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

So in the age of the Internet, the Obama White House has created a petition website to make it easy to exercise that right. The "We the People..." website:

<https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/>

offers a place to post petitions and/or sign them if you agree. Any petition that gets enough support, currently set at 100,000 signatures, will automatically receive an official response. Petitions must be short to meet the website guidelines.

The Skanner News decided to post the following petition:

"Create a Marshall Plan for Black America"

African Americans as a group remain enormously disadvantaged in the United States of America.

The 2010 census showed that the median wealth owned by White families was \$110,000, yet an average Black family owns less than \$5,000.

Black unemployment is generally twice that of Whites. In fact, racial disparities, rooted in America's shameful history of slavery and discrimination, affect every major economic indicator, as well as health and education outcomes.

America has failed to live up to its promise of equal opportunities for all. This wrong must be put right.

After WWII, the Marshall Plan rebuilt Europe. We call on President Obama to create **"Create a Marshall Plan for Black America."**

We ask the president to fund a grassroots economic development plan that will create true equality for all.

Pacific Science Center To Host Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Math & Science Celebration

WHAT: Pacific Science Center, Seattle Public Schools, and the University of Washington present the Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Math & Science Celebration for Children. Volunteer mentors from UW's student and professional mentor programs are matched up with approximately 300 students from local fourth and fifth grade classes, providing an opportunity for children from lower-income families to visit the Science Center and talk with college students pursuing degrees in the fields of math and science.

The school children will also hear motivational presentations from local professionals who will speak about the importance of education, overcoming barriers as well as an array of opportunities that exist in math, science, technology and engineering.

The tribute is intended to inspire students by reminding them of Dr. King's own excellence in math and science.

WHO: Fourth and fifth grade students from Seattle public and private schools will participate in the program.

WHEN: Wednesday, January 16, 2012

WHERE: Pacific Science Center is locat-

ed under the arches near the Space Needle.

WHY: As an independent, not-for-profit educational institution, Pacific Science Center inspires a love of science among people of all ages and backgrounds. This event plays an important role in Pacific Science Center's mission by providing multiple entry points into the world of science for everyone – children, teens and adults.

The event, held each January, honors the work and achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is Monday, Jan. 21.

HOW: The Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Math & Science Celebration for Children is co-sponsored by Pacific Science Center, Seattle Public Schools, the University of Washington's College of Engineering, and the University of Washington's Office of Minority Affairs.

The Seattle Public Library Celebrates Black History Month With Carver Gayton Feb. 9

Carver Gayton will read from a new facsimile edition of his great grandfather Lewis George Clarke's slave narrative, "Narrative

See CELEBRATION on page 7