

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



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.

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 impoverished 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 – 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 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.

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“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”
–Martin Luther King, Jr.

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