

January 19, 2015

### **“Where to from Here?” Rouse MLK Address**

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his last public speech. He was assassinated the next day.

Known as the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, it is one of King’s most famous. It has the all the essential elements of a King speech – eloquent oratory, profound imagery, inspirational messages. Perhaps because they were eerily prophetic, the most well-known lines are:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

What is not as well-known is the context for this speech. Dr. King was in Memphis – his second visit in two months -- to support a strike by black sanitation workers. The speech called for economic boycotts and peaceful protest. It also called on the audience to strengthen black financial institutions with a “bank-in” and an “insurance-in” of companies that were owned by and served the African American community. King was quite clear that the movement needed to work on improving material conditions of the poor. He preached:

It’s all right to talk about “long white robes over yonder,” in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It’s all right to talk about “streets flowing with milk and honey,” but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

It was quite purposeful that King paid attention to economics in this speech. His visit to Memphis and support of the sanitation strike was part of what he saw as the next phase of the Civil Rights Movement: the fight for economic justice. King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were discouraged that gains in civil rights were not translating into gains in financial security, and they saw the Vietnam War undercutting Johnson’s War on Poverty. Starting in 1967, they started planning a new campaign.

This new campaign -- “The Poor People’s Campaign,” as the effort was named -- was aimed at all poor people, regardless of race. The slide shows the cover of a pamphlet for the Campaign; a campaign focused on employment, income supports, and housing. King envisioned a second, bigger and more intense March on Washington to publicize the call for economic justice and human rights.

It happened. It happened without Martin Luther King, but it happened. From May 21 to June 24, 1968 thousands of poor people arrived in Washington, set up a makeshift town on the National Mall known as “Resurrection City,” and engaged in marches and lobbying Congress.

Much of the reason it happened was that the mood at the time was one of immense hope because of Dr. King’s successes; there was momentum behind his efforts. My parents were living in Washington, D.C. in 1967 and 1968 and were actively involved in local community organizations and worked with those affiliated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. You may recognize the two little girls in these photos taken at the time; one is me and the other my sister Carolyn who is also a professor here at Princeton. Our parents were among those who were supportive of Dr. King’s new efforts and our mom remembers just how brilliant Dr. King was to broaden the discussion beyond the rights of blacks and to build coalitions with others that were suffering from economic insecurity. We were regulars at the D.C. headquarters for the Poor People’s Campaign and as you can see in this next slide, also attended the march and supported those in Resurrection City. Some within the black community worried that by broadening the goal it would muddy the message, but many others recognized the power of numbers. Notably, and perhaps most importantly, were Dr. King’s efforts to join forces with the people of Appalachia.

For King the Promised Land wasn’t just about being equal under the law. He wanted legal rights to translate into economic and human rights. So the theme of my talk today is about this next phase – and sadly the last phase -- of his work. How has the country – and particularly African Americans – fared since the launch of King’s Poor People’s Campaign?

To start, we need to estimate how many poor people live in America, then and now. In theory, we define poverty as not having the resources to meet the basic needs for healthy living: insufficient income for food, shelter and clothing. The federal government measures poverty by using a method developed in 1963 by Mollie Orshansky, an economist working at the Social Security Administration. She attempted to measure “income inadequacy” based on estimates of how much it would cost different size families to buy a basic food plan. Assuming food should represent about one-third of a family’s budget, that number was multiplied by three and the poverty line was born. Of course there are problems with this: the definition doesn’t attempt to measure other necessities (like housing or utilities or clothing) and it doesn’t include assistance from the government or other sources – to name just two. Orshansky was aware of the fuzziness of the estimate but felt it could provide a “conservative underestimate” of poverty – AND it was better than what they had before, which was nothing. We didn’t know how many poor people lived in our country prior to 1963.

One result of the fuzziness is that the poverty line is pretty severe – currently, for a family of four it is about \$24,000 a year. \$24,000. Not even one semester at Princeton.

What can you do with \$24,000? The answer is a family can barely get by as shown in this next slide. A typical poor family starts with about \$2000 each month. They have to meet expenses such as housing, meals, transportation, healthcare, and childcare. Once you take into account lost wages due to illness and other responsibilities, and even once you add back in some public assistance, this family ends up in

the red each month. This means that each month they have to find a way to make ends meet whether borrowing from family and friends, pawning a valued item or taking out a payday loan. It means they start the next month even further behind, which means they will never catch up.

So have we made progress in alleviating poverty since the Poor People's Campaign? It depends on how you look at it. This next slide shows you the percentage of the population living below the poverty line in 1966 – in orange -- and today – in black, for the entire population and broken down by race and ethnicity. Notice that for the entire U.S. population, poverty has been pretty sticky -- in 1966 about 15% of the U.S. population lived below the poverty line; today about 15% of the population lives below the poverty line. That means that today about 45 million people in the United States live on less than \$24,000 for a family of four. Over 106 million – or one-third of the entire U.S. population – live on incomes that are about twice the poverty line – so \$48,000 for that family of four – which is still not a whole lot of money to get by on.

Even worse are the numbers of those who live in what we call “deep poverty.” About 20 million people live on incomes that are one-half of an already low poverty line.

For blacks, the story is a little more mixed. The poverty rate has decreased quite a bit since 1966 – by almost a half. But it was so high in 1966 – 42% -- that while it has gone down to 27%, it still means that almost 1/3 of blacks are poor – twice that of whites, and slightly more than Hispanics.

The question always comes up – but hasn't the U.S. experienced significant economic growth since the 1960's? Why hasn't that helped? Well, the growth has not been equally shared, to say the least. This graph shows average income for those in the top 1% of the income distribution in 1967 and today and the average income of those whose income is in the bottom 90% of the income distribution in the two periods as well. Notice that the average income for the bottom 90% has not changed between 1967 and now – in fact, if we account for purchasing power, their average income has actually declined slightly. But contrast that with the top 1%. Average incomes for that group have almost tripled (and this is adjusting for purchasing power!) -- rising from just over \$428,000 to over \$1.2 million a year. The one-percenters have gotten a lot of attention lately, and for good reason.

A very high number of people in this country are one paycheck or adverse event away from disaster. Consider the following true story – one of thousands that unfold everyday -- that illustrates how fragile are the lives of the poor and how they can come undone in a moment.

This is the story of a family living in Los Angeles. Both parents were born into poverty. They had a severely disabled daughter, who required a level of care most parents would be unable to handle on their own. But these parents could. The couple was not married and the father worked as a handyman making about \$60 a day. The mother received AFDC, or welfare. Very sadly, the child died. Around the same time, AFDC was ended and the new form of welfare, called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF -- required that the mom work and get tested to see what kind of work she would be suited for. She was found to be high functioning – which thrilled her because no one had ever suggested she had any talents – and she was placed in a training program. They had one car, but they needed a second so that the mother could get to her TANF training program and eventual job, and so

the father could continue working as a handyman. Fortunately, the family was given one by a friend. Not only did this mean they would eventually be able to get to and from two jobs, it helped them make a little extra money driving extended family around. The bottom line is that without two incomes, they could not afford a no-frills lifestyle in South Central Los Angeles. They ended each month slightly in the red; the big hope was that the mother would obtain valuable skills through the training that would make her employable at a decent wage. But there was a glitch. The mother only had a driver's permit, so was not supposed to drive without a licensed driver – her partner. One day she went out alone, was pulled over, and ticketed for driving without a license. And worse -- the police impounded her car. The price tag to get it back was \$800, which they couldn't pay – so they lost the car. Then the bus drivers went on strike so she couldn't get to the training program. It all fell apart, and they were back to square one.

This story illustrates many of the most poignant of the continuing struggles in black and other poor communities. The mother did not know just how talented she was as she never been told so by an ineffective school system; the car was impounded because the mother was driving without a licensed driver – a penalty most of us here in Princeton would think is unimaginable; and when her last hope was attending a training program to obtain valuable skills, an unreliable public transportation system let her down.

So what do we do about poverty in the U.S.? I would argue that in some areas we have enacted policies that are quite good and in other areas we have next to none. The trend has been to tie assistance to employment – training programs, the Earned Income Tax Credit, child care subsidies, even extra cash assistance for those who work. These work based policies have largely escaped the cuts in Congress and in some cases have been given a boost. But a safety net for those who cannot work – either because they can't find work over the long term or because they are unable to work – is pretty non-existent. As a result, an increasing number are starting to rely on the Social Security Disability Insurance program as a kind of support of last resort, an outcome that is not good for either most of the individuals involved or for society as a whole. They rely on a program that was not designed for this purpose. More importantly, the story of the family in Los Angeles highlights how intertwined are the challenges facing the poor and how efforts focused on only one aspect of poverty will invariably fail.

I am not going to let you leave this talk, however, on such a down note. It is important, particularly for Dr. King's legacy, to look at the strides we have made in the past half century. His work was not in vain. While the Poor People's Campaign did not get everything it sought, we have clearly seen improvements in economic stability and increased access to housing and education.

I want to focus particularly on education, as it is a notable bright spot. Let's start with high school completion. This next slide shows you that in 1966 only about 50% of the overall population had a high school diploma, compared to 88% today. And the biggest gains have been among blacks whose rate of completion increased from 28% to 85%.

More stunning is the growth in college completion. Whereas only 10% of adults had completed at least four years of college in 1966 that percentage has grown to 32% today -- with large gains for blacks and Hispanics as well.

Dr. King realized that education is a powerful force that translates into greater income, better health, and greater economic security in adulthood. At a speech early in his career, he lauded the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. On December 15, 1956 at a luncheon of the National Committee for Rural Schools he said:

To all men of good will, this decision came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of human captivity. It came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of colored people throughout the world who had had a dim vision of the promised land of freedom and justice ... this decision came as a legal and sociological deathblow to an evil that had occupied the throne of American life for several decades.

Of course while we are a long way from “separate but equal,” many blacks and Hispanics do attend poorer-quality – mostly segregated -- schools and there are still disparities in post-secondary school attendance. The fact that discrepancies remain only reinforces the importance of reforming our K through 12 system so that all children have access to quality public education, and the importance of increasing diversity in higher education by finding a place for all qualified and motivated students regardless of their race, ethnicity or economic background.

It is interesting, however, to note that at the end of King’s career, his focus on financial security turns this notion on its head a bit. He argued that first and foremost, families must have economic security -- because then they will have the power to demand a good education for their children, among other things. He delivered a speech on August 6, 1967 to the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference Convention titled “Where Do We Go From Here?” In it he emphasized the power of the purse: rather than trying to change society and hope that economic security follows, he argued that economic security can empower people to demand change. I quote:

We are likely to find that the problem of housing, education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished. The poor transformed into purchasers, will do a great deal of their own to alter housing decay. Negroes, who have a double disability, will have a greater effect on discrimination when they have the additional weapon of cash to use in their struggle.

So where DO we go from here? African-Americans have made progress in the last half century. We are more educated and less poor. We have advanced civil rights and voting rights. Dr. King would be proud of the non-violent protests that have taken place across this country in the past few years, from the Occupy Movement for economic justice to the more recent protests against police brutality.

But as the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Gardner have shown, we are not there yet. As the racial tensions on Princeton’s campus – in 2015 – have shown, we are not there yet. When the poverty rate in some counties in Appalachia reaches as high as 56%; we are not there yet. With over one-half of children attending public schools being eligible for a free- or reduced-price lunch, we are not there yet. When nearly 600,000 individuals are homeless on a single January night in the U.S., one-quarter of whom are children and nearly 40% of whom are in families; we are not there yet.

But we cannot quit now. To honor the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. we need to continue the journey to the Mountain. We need to keep going to the Promised Land. *This* is why we gather today. *This* is the point of Martin Luther King Day.

But I am going to challenge that premise just a bit. It will take a lot more than one day a year to get to the Promised Land. This is a journey that needs to take place every day. This is a journey that needs to be taken by all Americans. Until we get to the Promised Land. Together. Thank you.