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KING'S ECONOMIC JUSTICE LEGACY UNFULFILLED

CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER'S DREAM WENT BEYOND SOCIAL EQUALITY

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Almost 20 years have now passed since the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968. This January, however, marks not only the 59th anniversary of King's birth -- yes, he was just 39 when he was killed -- it also marks the 20th anniversary of King's most radical and far-reaching political initiative, the 1968 Poor People's Campaign.

Most people nowadays, even people who know of King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington, people who know about the 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott and the dramatic mid-1960s demonstrations in cities like Birmingham and Selma, Ala., don't think of the Poor People's Campaign when they think of King and the meaning of his legacy.

Indeed, too often, the political meaning of King's legacy seems restricted to the uplifting message of his and the civil rights movement's early victories and triumphs: the banishing of segregation from buses and other public facilities, the passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the meaningful entry of thousands of black Americans into the electoral process and public office, especially in the south.

The most challenging and relevant parts of King's legacy, however, are the parts many people are least familiar with: his strong criticisms of America's militaristic and quasi-imperialist behavior toward Third World countries, his condemnations of America's half-hearted concern with widespread poverty at home, and, most powerfully, his repeated warning that black America's painful inheritance from centuries of slavery and segregation would be remedied only when pressing issues of jobs, schools, and housing -- and not simply racism or discrimination per se -- were fully and thoroughly addressed.

It is when we look at this later legacy of King's, at his forceful denunciations of economic injustice and his hope that the 1968 Poor People's Campaign could do for the economic deprivations of the poverty-stricken what earlier civil rights gains had done for the legal deprivations of racial segregation, that we can more fully appreciate the immediate present-day relevance of King's message for us.

Likewise, it is also when we look at King's calls for economic justice that we have to acknowledge just how inadequate a job of pursuing King's legacy we have done these past 20 years, for the overall prevalence of economic injustice, and the overall economic condition of black America, is now distinctly worse than in 1968.

The economic successes of tens of thousands of black Americans -- the "new" black middle-class -- and the political and entertainment successes of an Andrew Young or a Bill Cosby must not be allowed to obscure the economic decline that more black Americans have experienced since the peak of the civil rights movement.

As black sociologist William J. Wilson's important new book "The Truly Disadvantaged" starkly highlights, the last two decades have witnessed a growing crisis in America's black inner-city neighborhoods. Especially in large cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit, virtually any social or economic yardstick -- employment, crime, schools or housing -- indicates how conditions today are dramatically worse than they were 25 years ago.

In January 1968, King realized that these urban economic problems would be the crucial issues in America's -- and especially black America's -- short- and long-term future. The essence of the Poor People's Campaign, he explained to both aides and reporters, was jobs -- jobs and income for those whose economic origins, poor schooling and depressed neighborhoods had provided them with few if any options for independent economic betterment in a society that had a rapidly declining need for unskilled, center-city workers. "We have an ultimate goal of freedom, independence, self-determination," he told his Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff, but he acknowledged that "we aren't going to get all of that next year."

Instead, King noted, "we must face the fact that we have a basic economic problem in that the vast majority of black people in our country are perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity." However, he stressed, "if there's a will, there's a way. . . . We can develop the skills if there's a determination for full employment, and we are in a situation now where we've got to do something about our economic plight."

King had no illusions that meaningful economic opportunity could be won quickly. "Let me assure you that this isn't going to be an easy struggle . . . because in a sense we're dealing not with segregation . . . not with the political issue of the right to vote . . . [but] we're dealing in a sense with class issues, we're dealing with the problem of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, between the privileged and the underprivileged. And we're taking on a mammoth job now, and it isn't going to be easy. You see, it didn't cost America one penny to integrate lunch counters. In fact, it profited the business community to do it. It didn't cost the nation one penny to guarantee the right to vote. But now we're in a period where it's going to cost the nation billions of dollars to grapple with the problems that we face."

King's unromantic realism about the difficulty of attaining widespread economic change on behalf of those whom we now call the underclass meant that he would be disappointed, but not fundamentally surprised, if he could look back from the vantage point of 1988 at the dismal lack of progress our society has registered on these issues in the 20 years since 1968.

King's realism, however, would be coupled -- as it was in 1968 -- with a firm determination that we must go all out in trying to build a political coalition that would confront our crisis of the underclass. In doing so, it would be crucial to keep in mind that coalitions of support can be built not only through appealing to people's positive moral values and concerns, but that they also can be constructed on the basis of more tangible -- and crass -- considerations of long-term economic self-interest.

As King's 1968 comment about the economic benefits Southern white business owners registered from desegregation indicates, and as the histories of scores of Southern cities' desegregation stories further reflect, economic self-interest calculations on the part of major white business figures repeatedly played a positive role in hastening the attainment of desegregation, once the energetic activism of thousands of black Southerners had made the inevitability of segregation's collapse an inescapable fact.

In much the same way, present-day supporters of King's radically challenging economic justice legacy need to appreciate that America's most materially advantaged individuals and corporations can potentially be convinced that a far-reaching -- and costly -- program to combat the crisis of the underclass is not something they should oppose or ignore, but is something they ought to support. For it is in no American's long-term interest -- economic or otherwise -- for our society to increasingly become saddled with the hopelessness, anger, and destructiveness of a largely black, inner-city population whose lives have no desirable economic opportunities.

America's economic elite ought to be persuaded that it is better to make major child health and intensive education allocations now, to help ensure a better-trained and better-skilled population of potential employees in future decades, than to continue to downplay or ignore our underclass crisis. The latter course would mean that, in future years, we would have to pay the tremendously high price -- both in dollars and democratic values -- that a substantially greater social control apparatus -- police, courts, and especially prisons -- will require if big-city equivalents of South African-style "bantustans" are instead going to be this era's enduring legacy to America's future.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s most challenging legacy to us today, in 1988, is to help us see that a future of increased economic opportunity and egalitarianism, rather than a future of increasing class bifurcation and division, is in the long-term interest of all Americans, rich and poor, white and black.

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