

The Issue of Poverty
The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike
&
The Poor People's Campaign

[In *Going Down Jericho Road* (W.W. Norton, New York, 2007), Professor Michael Honey explores the Memphis sanitation workers' strike and its connection with Martin Luther King's growing concern for the issue of economic injustice, a concern that would lead to his last campaign, cut short by his assassination in Memphis, where he traveled to support the strike and the sanitation workers. Professor Peter Edelman's powerful book, *Searching for America's Heart* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001) is the story of Robert F. Kennedy's concern for the effects of poverty on children, and of women and children "pushed to the edge" by the realities of poverty. Professor James Patterson explores this issue in his iconic treatise *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 2003). The Poor People's Campaign and the story of the Memphis strike quite likely holds the key to our understanding of the legacy of the civil rights movement, and the integrity of our Democracy, including the dignity denied many of America's citizens by private economic interests and our own government.]

Professor Honey begins the story of the Memphis strike by taking the reader's eye to the statue of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest at the center of the City. Noting that the image is of General Forrest in his military role (on behalf of the Confederacy), Professor Honey notes that nothing is said about General Forrest's economic position having come from selling slaves, or that he organized the Ku Klux Klan to terrorize black voters and their white allies during the early days of Reconstruction.

Against this backdrop, Professor Honey describes Memphis as a City identified with the history of the entrenched segregation that was the legacy of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Chronicling the history of the brutalizing of black union organizers, including at the

factories of Ford Motor Company and the Firestone Company in the late 1930's, Professor Honey notes that a vision of social change emerged from the mid-1940's to 1960, when the population of Memphis grew to 500,000, including a black population of nearly 200,000. The Civil Rights Movement's efforts had roots in labor organizing during the era of segregation that followed *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The leadership of A. Phillip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (in 1925), representing more than 20,000 black Pullman Company railroad car porters, was especially significant, and included his original vision of the March on Washington as early as 1941. But efforts to organize southern workers remained largely suppressed throughout the mid-1950's, influenced by the politics of white supremacy (identified with U.S. Senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi, who held anti-union hearings in Memphis), and the general "Communist conspiracy" rhetoric following WWII. This successful attack on union organizing also effectively suppressed demands for integration, which was directly related to the campaign against segregation and racial discrimination.

Dr. King had spoken in Memphis on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement, and specifically the subject of voting rights, as early as the summer of 1959, at Mason Temple, where he would give his last speech on April 3, 1968. Voting rights would prove to be a significant influence on the future of civil rights for black citizens and workers in Memphis. The establishment of "at-large" districts, and the requirement that all school board candidates run at-large, secured the election of whites, including Henry Loeb, a Mayor whose fierce resistance to the demands of black sanitation workers for decent working conditions would lead to worker deaths and eventually the protracted sanitation worker strike of 1968.

Born in Memphis, Henry Loeb had been educated at Phillips Academy Prep and then Brown University in Boston, had served on a P.T. boat, and knew John F. Kennedy during WWII. Loeb's seminal allegiance was to anti-communist, not pro-segregation reasons for opposing so-called "liberal" initiatives by government

and labor. Initially popular with the black community when he ran for the City Commission, partly because of his Jewish ancestry and his initial public works projects, he quickly revealed his exploitation of black labor in his role as Director of Public Works, paying low wages to black sanitation workers and buying the cheapest trucks and equipment. By the time he ran for Mayor in 1959, he had openly adopted segregationist (“separate-but-equal”) views for political purposes, declaring that he would resist any court-ordered integration.

By 1963, when the Movement focused its attention on Birmingham, economic issues for blacks in Memphis were dire. Professor Honey writes that black family income was one-third the white family average. Like Birmingham, the civil rights campaign focused on jobs, including racial hiring practices, and access to hospitals, hotels, restaurants and other places of public accommodation – while protests of school segregation and the denial of voting rights were met by violent white resistance. What Professor Honey emphasizes in telling the story of Memphis is that, while the media focused on the latter issues, economic issues were becoming principal civil rights issues in Birmingham and Memphis, especially following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which included specific provisions for the prohibition of employment discrimination based on race, and other provisions for equal employment opportunity. And, while gains were made in the desegregation of higher education and in the desegregation of public parks and restaurants, jobs, wages and working conditions for black employees, including public employees remained the subject of political and popular white resistance. Professor Honey writes that, “Blacks in both city and private employment could not find decent jobs, and the black working class remained stuck at the bottom of the economic order.”

Moreover, Professor Honey notes: “White voters overwhelmingly supported Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, who solicited the segregationist vote by supporting “states’ rights,” a code word for defending segregation. Alabama Governor George Wallace ran for president in the primaries, attracting an anti-

Communist and pro-segregationist following. The John Birch Society (founded in 1959 by Robert Welch, who spoke in Memphis in 1961 and denounced the Freedom Riders as Communists) opened a Memphis bookstore in 1965. It called for a return to the unfettered capitalism of the late Nineteenth Century, when neither workers nor African-Americans had rights under the law. “[In this] polarizing political atmosphere, a majority of working-class as well as middle class white voters – except for many members of organized labor – switched from the Democratic to the Republican Party, which in Tennessee jettisoned any pretense of support for civil rights.”

[Professor Honey’s observation here is important, given the identification of segregationist views with white Southern Democrats, even after the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy. The transformative events that included Eisenhower’s appointment of Earl Warren and the federal judges who would shape the southern jurisprudence that was *Brown’s* immediate legacy, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the events in Little Rock, the election of John F. Kennedy, and the impact of the Direct Action Campaign on Kennedy’s commitment to civil rights, were all influential in this shift in party politics that took hold in 1964, and attracted white working and middle class voters].

Even before 1964, civil rights movement leadership and popular sentiment saw poverty and racial inequality in employment as a major aspect of the second-class status of black citizens. Dr. King increased his emphasis on the co-dependent issues of employment and poverty, including his criticism of racial discrimination within unions themselves. Moreover, he began to openly speak of a connection between the military and industry, a dialogue that can be traced to Lincoln and in the modern era to Dwight Eisenhower’s warning, in his January, 1961 farewell speech from the White House that a growing “military-industrial complex” was a threat to Democracy (“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The

potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist”).

While not captured in the popularly shown vignettes from Dr. King’s “I Have A Dream” speech at the August, 1963 March on Washington, Dr. King’s message included his increasing concern for America’s inattention to poverty: “The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material abundance...an exile in his own land.” Later, in 1964, speaking on behalf of female workers being paid sub-poverty wages at the Scripto pen factory, Dr. King’s passionate colleague, Reverend C.T. Vivian, declared that “[the] mainstream of America’s life is labor [and] labor’s demands are our demands.”

In 1960, Memphis was a city where most black workers were at the bottom of the labor force, without representation among supervisory or salaried employees, and a declining representation within the dozen-plus skilled crafts unions (*e.g.*, bricklayers, carpenters, *etc.*). Professor Honey presents a picture in which jobless young black men joined the military and went off to be injured or killed in Vietnam, “conscripted by an all-white draft board.” Black women obtained only the worst factory jobs, and for the most part cleaned the homes of whites for \$3.00 - \$5.00 per day; cleaned schools for 58 cents per hour; or worked in the city hospital for \$80 a month. Black men did the heavy, dirty work on the streets, in hotels, hospitals, fields and factories, “and those who could find nothing else hauled garbage.” This last cohort of men, the sanitation workers of Memphis, became, in 1968, the symbol for human dignity, striking under the banner “I AM A MAN.”

A word about working conditions: In the 1960’s, garbage was collected by hand. That is to say, garbage was placed in small metal tubs or cans, which workers carried by hand to the garbage truck. Workers supplied their own clothes and gloves. Workers could be sent home if they reported even a minute late to work, or in bad weather at the discretion of white supervisors, and if sent home they received no pay. In contrast, if they worked overtime,

the amount of pay was in many instances less than equal to time actually worked. In 1960, Professor Honey notes that black sanitation workers were paid between 94 cents and \$1.14 per hour, and during the following years, hourly wages were never more than 5 cents per hour above the minimum wage for laborers. Workers who were sick or injured on the job had to find their own transportation to a doctor or home; for many workers who rode the city bus to work, this meant waiting as much as an hour for a bus. White supervisors were paid regardless of weather conditions, but if a black sanitation worker was sent home because of inclement weather, he could be denied any pay for that day. These conditions combined to require many men to work multiple jobs, or to seek housing and food subsidies while working full time for the City.

Attempts to organize and negotiate, the City's resistance, and the 1968 strike: In 1960, Thomas Oliver (T.O.) Jones, who worked on a truck (a fellow "tub toter"), attempted to organize a local union. Understanding that "workers themselves had to take action," he used his own money to establish a small treasury, and sought the support of O.Z. Evers, a neighborhood civic activist with union experience in Chicago and California. Evers began signing up sanitation workers as members of Teamsters Local 984, which already represented sanitation workers in Nashville, Knoxville and Chattanooga. He then went to the City with a request that wages be increased to \$1.90 per hour, or a lesser amount if workers were guaranteed pay on inclement days when they could not work. Finally, he challenged the exclusion of blacks from eligibility for supervisory positions and the absence of rights on the job (*e.g.*, uniforms, boots, and some kind of locker room facilities). The Commissioner of Public Works dismissed Evers' request to negotiate, indicating that there would be no union, and that he would eliminate the sanitation division and replace it with a private contractor if public sanitation workers organized.

At this point, Professor Honey notes, Mayor Loeb apparently met with Teamsters representatives and the Teamsters withdrew from the Evers' organizing campaign. However, with the help of the

Retail Clerks Union, Local 1529, T.O. Jones continued organizing efforts, directing his message not only to sanitation workers, but to all black city workers who were working under substandard conditions for substandard pay. *In June, 1960, the Public Works Department compiled a list of 33 workers, including Jones, who it said were at the center of the organizing activities, and fired them all.*

During the following three years, encouraged by the Movement's success in Birmingham, and President Kennedy's Executive Order giving federal employees the right to organize, T.O Jones sought the help of Jerry Wurf, national President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. AFSCME provided a Charter for Local 1733, named in honor of the 33 workers who were fired in 1963. At the presentation of the Charter, Father James Murray declared that: "Catholic moral theologians are practically unanimous in holding that it is morally wrong for civic or other authorities to refuse recognition to freely chosen unions of public servants." The basic connection with the union's values and the general civil rights struggle was that "race relations based on subservience" was unacceptable.

In 1965, William Ingram became Mayor and Pete Sisson became Public Works Commissioner with T.O. Jones support, based on promises that they would support the union movement. But, within 14 days of taking office, Sisson fired five of the union's officers. Though two of the five were reinstated, the new administration made it clear that it had no intention of recognizing a public employee union. Thereafter, Sisson agreed to minor concessions regarding the weight of garbage containers, pay scales, putting heaters in some of the old trucks, and making workers eligible for social security; however black workers continued to have no access to promotions and basic conditions and worker abuse continued, including the denial of raingear, and neglect of need repairs to trucks, including dangerous compacting mechanisms. In August, 500 workers met and agreed to strike, but the City obtained a Temporary Restraining Order threatening

Jones and other union organizers with jail if they struck or picketed.

Then, in 1967, Henry Loeb was re-elected, under a “law and order” and “be proud again” campaign message that appealed to white residents who feared high taxes and wanted clean streets and other city services at low cost. Loeb promised then what we see today from such campaigns, a pledge to cut budget deficits by cutting public jobs and expenses. On this promise, Loeb won the election over vehement black opposition by gaining 90% of the white vote. Loeb’s re-election was a setback to Local 1733. Loeb tightened City labor policies, refused to spend money on updated equipment, and, as workers retired, died, or were injured, he simply didn’t fill their positions.

On January 30, events occurred that brought Loeb’s actions to center stage. A group of black workers reported for work, to lay drainage pipes and sidewalks, to haul rocks and build concrete walls, and to dig sewers. When a hard shower lasted for 30 minutes, the workers were sent home, without pay. The next day, two sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed by a faulty garbage compactor in the back of the truck to which they were assigned, one of the old, unrepaired trucks kept in service by Loeb beyond its safe years. The City offered an insulting *de minimus* benefit to the dead men’s families and offered the other men only two hour’s pay for January 30. In language which is almost visual, Professor Honey writes that on the evening of February 11, sanitation workers met at the Memphis Labor Temple and declared “*[The City] gives us nothing, we’ll give them nothing....The men did not vote; they simply shouted approval and filed out of the building....The workers set out with no organization or plans; they just went home. Some began to call their friends, urging them not to go to work....These men had decided to stand up to the City of Memphis.*” [Recalling the Birmingham campaign, and Rev. Bevel’s concern for the fact that workers participating in civil rights protests might lose their jobs, the decision of the Memphis sanitation workers seems all the more courageous and significant].

Professor Honey notes that the spontaneous strike did not follow typical AFSCME protocol, *i.e.*, to strike only if you knew you could win, to be aware of timing, and to have adequate financial backing to support striking workers. But, Professor Honey quotes T.O. Jones as observing: “The men weren’t thinking of strategy; they were thinking of justice and injustice.”

AFSCME did send representatives, including Bill Lucy, from its national office to Memphis. Lucy, born in Memphis in 1933, and aware of its history, had studied engineering in college in California. He had become AFSCME’s associate director for legislation and community affairs and its best organizer. Most important, Lucy saw Dr. King’s vision of black labor as integral to the civil rights movement.

Meanwhile, Loeb continued to be influenced by his personal experiences as well. [Recall Professor James Loewen’s observation about how inherited family, community, and culture influence all those who are involved in dialogic relationships]. As a former employer in the low-wage laundry industry, Loeb did not inherit any positive thoughts about enabling a union of low-wage workers to function. Loeb and the business class to which he belonged saw worker solidarity and demands as a violation of the employer’s property and contract rights. And this view was further influenced by Loeb’s racial bias. He expected, Professor Honey writes, that sanitation workers, like laundry workers, would come to him “hat in hand.”

All this said, matters did not end with Loeb’s basic philosophy and beliefs. He was also influenced by a vision of revolution, and he called for surveillance of Local 1733 by the Memphis Police Intelligence Bureau, which had a close relationship with J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. The proactive surveillance effort included the constant use of undercover “counterintelligence” agents, the maintenance of files on labor, civil rights, antiwar and other “radical” organizations, and individuals that would continue throughout the strike. As an example, the FBI had highlighted

Rev. James Lawson's seminal role in founding SNCC, which the FBI characterized as a dangerous revolutionary organization.

As the adversarial environment grew, Lucy took the initiative and went to the Mayor with the sanitation workers, reminding Loeb that he had always publicly declared that he would meet with them. Loeb directed the group to the city auditorium and "tried to command them back to work." When Loeb attempted to characterize his early years in the department as years when the workers came to him, they instead remembered his refusals to respond to their most pressing grievances. Professor Honey cites the recollection of AFSCME organizer Jesse Epps that "having been elected on a racist ticket," Loeb "couldn't have predominantly black men telling him what to do."

For the rest of the strike, Loeb "became two people," showing one face to the press and white community and a totally different face to the sanitation workers and the black community. Showing the characteristics of Richard Nixon's "southern strategy," Loeb's "law-and-order" rhetoric ignored President Kennedy's Executive Order and the Tennessee Supreme Court's tacit approval of the rights of public employees to organize, and his public persona helped fuel white backlash against the strike. Indeed, Professor Honey notes, many whites saw the battle against black union organizing as a way to resist the civil rights revolution. "On the other hand," Professor Honey writes, "for African-Americans...the word *recognition* had important connotations of citizenship rights; for black workers it meant a union, a written contract, and hope for fair treatment and respect on the job."

Local newspapers had, on occasion, criticized white violence aimed at the movement in 1960-1963, but generally gave no affirmative attention to the movement or black life in general. Professor Honey explains that this failure to communicate "helped produce a failure of community." In fact, if anything, the local white press suggested that Loeb spoke for the community, ignoring the fact that blacks, who comprised 40% of Memphis, opposed his views. Moreover, the local press followed the pattern of explaining the

union movement as being fueled by agitators, ignoring the fact that it was very much an effort of the workers themselves. At the extreme, *The Commercial Appeal* attacked T.O. Jones' personal character and editorialized against AFSCME and unionization in general, and white television coverage was anti-union. Since whites lacked any other source of information, they accepted this image of the strikers and the City. As Reverend James Lawson wondered whether editors purposefully decided to offend black readers, or were simply ignorant of their own racism, the media consistently portrayed Dr. King through images of his most animated moments, never showing photos of him that would accurately portray his calm and deliberate manner. In the end, public opinion was inevitably split along racial lines, with the local media an active influence on polarization.

AFSCME's leadership turned to Tommy Powell, the young white President of the Memphis Labor Council. Powell came from a poor farm family background, and had engaged in the organizational efforts of the American Meat Cutters Union, a racially progressive union that gave him experience organizing black and white workers in Mississippi. Powell's experience in civil rights included his observation of the use of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by packinghouse workers to fight against race discrimination in employment. Powell also possessed political experience, having served in the Tennessee House of Representatives. With this experience, he assumed a role in supporting the sanitation workers and, along with other leaders of the Memphis AFL-CIO called for white union support of the sanitation workers' right to organize and to strike in light of the City's obstreperous resistance. His first attempts failed, as council members captured by the Goldwater Republican rhetoric declared that strikes and social movements were a part of a Communist conspiracy to manipulate blacks and the poor.

Professor Honey notes that clergy played a role from the very first days of the strike, but, as in Birmingham, in 1963, white religious leaders were perceived by black clergy as mostly silent. The social gospel that preached social activism and social reform, *e.g.*, efforts

to end poverty, went beyond the “salvation” message that left social issues out of religious discussion. Black ministers contacted white clergy to intervene in efforts to bring the City to a position which could settle the strike, and Rabbi James Wax, Rev. James Jordan, and Father Nicholas Vieron (co-chairs of a race relations committee) did understand the social gospel – and they admired Dr. King. But their inherited southern white middle-class attitudes perceived employee rights issues negatively when compared to the issue of nondiscriminatory access to public accommodations. Moreover, Rabbi Wax emphasized a preference for talking with influential whites without any asserted pressure from the black community, *i.e.*, without pickets or protests to bring attention to the reasons for the strike. From the start, Wax’s outlining of the workers’ grievances at seminal meetings with City leaders were rebuffed unless union leaders of Local 1733 would immediately end the strike. Subsequent attempts by AFSCME, though Wurf, to obtain an agreement simply allowing for voluntary dues deduction through an independent credit union, with no formal demand for a bargaining contract were flatly rejected.

During all of this time, the message of The Poor People’s Campaign was becoming perhaps the most important message on the subject of civil rights since Montgomery. It can be argued that it is this part of Dr. King’s challenge that remains the legacy of his efforts and the defining failure of our present commitment to civil rights. Appreciating the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Dr. King shifted his discussion to the war and the struggle of the working class. His aim was to emphasize the need for jobs and sustainable income for working class citizens, including the disproportionate number of black citizens that lacked jobs, or wages that could sustain their families. This was not a new message, but an emphasis of the findings of the Kerner Commission (which called for jobs, housing and economic development programs) and messages coming from the NAACP, the Urban League, the Ford Foundation and *Newsweek* magazine. The aim of these messages was to create a paradigm, supported by the private sector, nonprofit

organizations, and the government that would allow poor people to “work their way out of poverty” by providing workers with sustainable wages, and by providing training for displaced workers. Such programs would also, by sheer logic, reduce crime, drugs and the imprisonment that flowed from poverty. Professor Honey notes that this argument had been advanced by many academics and policymakers and a Harris Poll showed that the majority of Americans supported the role of government in this effort.

Notwithstanding the wide support for this national goal, Dr. King’s renewed focus on the issue of poverty had adversaries in the American power structure. He knew this, and was reminded of the powerful words attributed to Frederick Douglass: “*Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.*” This was the message that would bring the events in Memphis to center stage, and that would bring Dr. King to Memphis in March and April of 1968.

The power structure at the time included the House Un-American Activities Committee, Senator James O. Eastland (who was directly identified with the White Citizens Council throughout the civil rights movement), other “anti-subversive” politicians, and the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. Professor Honey notes that these powerful adversaries of Dr. King enjoyed immunity from libel laws, and were thus free to make exaggerated allegations that Dr. King and the movement were a part of a Communist threat. Professor Honey notes, the local press continued to give direct coverage to letters from White Citizens Council members such as Robert Patterson, who rejected the Kerner Commission Report, characterized the civil rights movement as promoting the right to riot, and concluded that the truth was “the races are different.” Andrew Young would characterize Hoover’s view of the movement as “the enemy,” and Hoover would be described as plotting Dr. King’s ruin.

And, Professor Honey notes, Dr. King had detractors within the movement, including Stokely Carmichael, who had first

challenged Dr. King's campaign as ineffective and compromising during the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965. Dr. King talked and listened to his detractors and was open about his support of black youth, including SNCC. But he continued to assert his leadership, and included the black middle class in his message, noting that he was concerned about not just poor blacks, but poor whites, and other poor minorities, *i.e.*, America's economic underclass. As Professor Honey takes us through the last chapter of Dr. King's life, it is clear that his last campaign would involve his constant, and exhausting efforts to align the constituencies that he hoped would act collectively in the spirit of the prior phases of a successful campaign for civil rights.

The sanitation worker protests continue: On February 22, the city council again stonewalled the sanitation workers attempt at any meaningful negotiation, and they began a march from City Hall to Mason Temple. This three-mile march began in a festive mood, but "police cars suddenly appeared, each packed with five police officers openly displaying rifles and billy clubs." Some police drove their cars into closed formation and began to push marchers onto the sidewalk. The police then began to openly confront the marchers, using mace. When the few marchers who could remain together reached Mason Temple, with police outside holding billy clubs, Wurf announced that the city had lied, and then responded violently to peaceful demands and protests. Two days later, on February 24, James Lawson told reporters at a press conference that the city had treated the sanitation workers "as though they were not men." Perhaps more directly than ever before, he said "at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person." This image was to become a central image of the strike, as workers would later physically carry placards reading "I AM A MAN" as a symbol of the strike. Consistent with the seminal message of the Montgomery movement, "I AM A MAN" meant self-determination, freedom to choose, and more specifically the right to organize as workers.

Meanwhile, the city turned to the local courts, relying on a 1966 ruling by Chancellor Robert Hoffman, and procured an injunction

that prevented AFSCME from authorizing or having any role in the strike and arguably made any attempt at protest grounds for arrest – despite clear First Amendment implications. Mayor Loeb would eventually cancel the city’s contributions to the County Welfare Commission, thus effectively denying food stamps for strikers, and also rejected the authority of an independent credit union to serve as a vehicle for collection of voluntary union dues. And, with the exception of a part of the union movement (including white leaders like Wurf and Powell), and certain exceptional representatives of the white clergy and white community, most whites remained silent.

March and April loomed as times of urgency. The youth movement, including both unorganized youth and activists like Charles Cabbage and Stokely Carmichael who disagreed with Dr. King’s “compromising” approach, became more visible and assertive, as yet other youth groups continued to participate in Lawson and King’s Gandhian protests and interracial dialogue. Following the historically successful March on Washington, in August 1963, American cities had been the scene of riots, which, coupled with protests against the Vietnam War, caused a white backlash. Dr. King had noted these riots as the results of hopelessness, and had consistently reminded those who would listen that social reform would remove the conditions that cause people to act in desperation.

With all of this history in mind, Dr. King came to Memphis on March 18, 1968, and addressed 15,000 people at Mason Temple. Professor Honey writes that, “with no shouts of Black Power or sell-out” King’s message was one of unity, determination and mass participation – [re-invoking] the power of the early 1960’s black freedom struggle. Honey writes brilliantly, that: “*This meeting brought together the labor struggle, civil rights, and the black religious tradition of prophetic oratory in a marvelous new convergence....[A] victory in Memphis would be a victory for the nation.*” (emphasis mine). Regarding the religious message, Dr. King was emphasizing that social change should not be left to God. Harkening back to his message to religious leaders from his

jail cell in Birmingham, in which he emphasized the writings of Niebuhr and Buber, he declared that people must themselves change their history and define their own needs. The question of civil rights was a question of human rights. Professor Honey also notes that King's message, like his message in Montgomery, relied upon *both scripture and the Constitution* (emphasis mine). He "confirmed that black poverty resulted not from people's lack of initiative or hard work, but rather from powerlessness inflicted by unjust structures of power."

On March 28, marchers began to assemble, with "I AM A MAN" placards visible as the new symbol of the strike. When Dr. King arrived, the crowd had swelled to 15,000, beyond the size anticipated by Lawson, and included many young people who were not trained in Lawson's approach to the march. As the march began, Dr. King was both exhausted from prior travels and anxious about the sheer size and lack of supervision of the crowd. Suddenly, those at the front of the march heard disturbances from the rear, and Lawson noticed people breaking windows. Professor Honey writes that "it looked like a set-up." As the march came to a confused and abrupt stop, Lawson directed people to return to the Clayborn Temple, but police were already physically confronting the crowd, using mace and tear gas. As a phalanx of police battled protesters who threw rocks and bottles at them, other police pursued some of the sanitation workers. As people retreated to Clayborn Temple, sick from tear gas and injured by beatings and broken glass, some in the crowd looted stores.

When police had cleared the streets, they fanned out and began to enter restaurants, pool halls, and bars, some a significant distance from the "riot area" – ordering patrons to leave. At one restaurant, when diners asked if they could finish their meals, police dragged them outside, pursued them to their cars and physically assaulted some of them. In another incident, police pursued young men carrying television sets and stereos from a Sears store and isolated one young male who had escaped inside a cellar door. When the youth emerged from the cellar at the direction of officers, one placed a 12 gauge shotgun in his stomach

and shot him. Despite the officers' claim that he had brandished a large knife, later newspaper photos of his dead body lying on the basement stairwell showed that when shot his eyes and mouth were wide open and his hands were above his head. Police later produced a rusty butcher knife with no fingerprints on it. Nearly a dozen eye-witnesses said that the young man had no weapon and was displaying his upward held palms as he pled for his life. They also testified that when he was shot, the officer's shotgun was touching his stomach. Later, in 1971, the police chief admitted that the knife had no fingerprints on it and that police had thrown the knife, shotgun pellets and the young man's clothing into the Mississippi River five months after the incident.

William Sullivan, the Assistant Director of the FBI, described as "Hoover's man in charge of the campaign to destroy Dr. King," responded to the events above-described by asking for reports whether King had created the violence. The FBI deliberately misstated the truth by publishing a memo that "violence occurs just about everywhere [Dr. King] goes." Sullivan urged Memphis agents to "get everything possible on King." As local media condemned Dr. King, U.S. Senator Robert Byrd (of West Virginia) called Dr. King a "self-seeking rabble-rouser" and other senators talked of committee investigations of The Poor People's Campaign.

Later accounts of the day have suggested that an amorphous organization of activists known as "The Invaders" were responsible for the window-breaking disturbances during the march, but other accounts, including Andrew Young's perspective of the events are that the FBI had paid provocateurs to disrupt the march. One thing is sure. Professor Honey recalls that when Dr. King later met with Charles Cabbage and others following the incidents that had occurred, he calmly and firmly embraced full participation, but insisted on nonviolent discipline. Dr. King made it clear that every person had a right to be involved in the issue of his own freedom, and that youth had a place in the movement.

Dr. King carried this message to reporters who pressured him about the likelihood of violence. He candidly admonished reporters that no one could guarantee that people whose government had done nothing about the recommendations of the Kerner Commission would not vent their anger in any city across the country; but he made it clear that he was committed to the nonviolent protest of economic injustice, including the Memphis strike. Importantly, he also reminded reporters that “rioters” had not harmed people, but had targeted property – and that the vast majority of personal injury was to Blacks at the hands of police units.

This perspective was lost on the city. On the evening of March 28, Mayor Loeb had placed the city under martial law. 4,000 National Guardsmen (nearly all white males) had arrived from throughout the state, all carrying rifles and bayonets, with some in battle fatigues carrying boxes of ammunition and tear gas. These men had little or no training, and were placed under the direction of the Memphis Police Department. Professor Honey notes that during the comparable military occupation of Detroit, scores of African-Americans had been shot. During the next five nights, anyone walking the streets was subject to arrest and police routinely stopped and searched black people, and entered their homes without warrants, to seize personal property – sometimes damaging homes and cursing blacks of all ages. Authorities sealed off Beale Street and white Guardsmen marched in formation with drawn bayonets. Whites, angered by the property damage to businesses during the aborted march, blamed blacks. The President of the Memphis Chamber of Commerce told the New York Times: “You can’t take these Negro people and make the kind of citizens out of them you’d like.”(*sic*). Rev. Lawson would later note that the nonviolence of thousands of black citizens who moved back to the church and their homes was lost in press accounts of the story.

The sanitation workers resolved to continue their peaceful protests, and while AFSCME’s concern for its ability to provide funds for the strikers grew, it remained convinced that the success

of the strike was critical to the success of worker organization in the south. As the workers' resolve continued, The Washington Post reported that the strike "has expanded into a broad human rights confrontation in which almost every aspect of Negro life in Memphis is now at issue." The Mayor's resolve also continued and he kept non-union trucks on the streets and increased the city's allocation of funds for riot-control equipment.

On March 31, Dr. King spoke at Washington D.C.'s National Cathedral, describing justice and peace as moral goals. That night, President Lyndon Johnson declared to a national television audience that he would not seek a second term as President, vowing to spend the balance of his days in office avoiding partisan politics and seeking an end to the war. Dr. King told the President that he would speak with anyone in the administration about the Kerner Commission Report.

On April 3, Dr. King returned to Memphis, seeing the strike as a prelude to the planned Poor People's March on Washington. His flight was delayed by a bomb threat and the threats to his life, beginning in Montgomery over a decade earlier were obviously the subject of discussion. Professor Honey notes that a House select Committee on Assassinations would later censure the FBI for doing nothing to prevent an attack on Dr. King. Rev. Lawson explained that law enforcement was intended for surveillance, not protection, and that none of the surveillance contributed to Dr. King's personal security. The most obvious example of this perspective is that none of the surveillance efforts led to the apprehension of James Earl Ray, who drove into Memphis on April 3, in a white Ford Mustang. Ray was a habitual criminal who subscribed to Klan publications linking integration to Communism, and he and his brother John were known as wanting King killed.

As Dr. King began meetings with colleagues in Memphis, the city sought an injunction in federal court, preventing any further march. Judge Bailey Brown issued a Temporary Restraining Order, triggering an ACLU call to prominent Memphis attorney

Lucius Burch. Burch saw Loeb's handling of the strike as "a tragedy of inflexibility" and his legal team, which included David Caywood, Michael Cody, and Charles Newman, met with Dr. King. Impressed with Dr. King's explanation that a successful march was critical to the success of the economic campaign, Burch's team sought a hearing on the federal injunction [They eventually were successful in obtaining an order lifting the injunction].

Dr. King's scheduled speech at Mason Temple on April 4 was now the subject of immense anticipation. Reverend Abernathy and others arrived at Mason Temple for a mass meeting on the stormy night of April 3, intending to set the stage for Dr. King's address the following night. When they arrived, it was obvious that the capacity crowd had come to hear Dr. King, and Rev. Abernathy called Dr. King to tell him that his presence was needed in the moment of this meeting. Dr. King arrived, not knowing that the speech he was about to give would be the most powerful since his "I Have A Dream" speech in 1963, and his last speech.

Professor Honey notes that, unlike his speech in Washington, which received national television coverage, this speech was a more intimate, almost private or personal message. In words that have now been given visual meaning at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., he began by painting a picture of despair, but casting this picture as he did in Montgomery and in the vision of The Poor People's Campaign. Out of this despair, he saw the strength of the nonviolent struggle – the power of the determination of oppressed people to effect social change. He called for a commitment to the strike and the struggle for economic justice until the end. Using the spiritual language he had used since Montgomery, he reminded his audience of the story of the plight of the man who had been robbed and beaten on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. In recalling the decision of a traveler on that road to stop and help the man, he said that others who did not stop and help may have been afraid to do so because the road was a dangerous road. But he said that the good Samaritan who stopped to help must have asked not what would

happen to him if he stopped to help the man, but what would happen to the man if he did not help. And so, he captured the essential question of the Memphis strike and The Poor People's Campaign: "The question is not if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me? If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?"

Then, nearly exhausted, he revealed his personal fears, telling his audience of the bomb threat to his flight, and the dangerousness of the sickness of racism. And, at that moment, Professor Honey writes, he "seemed to confide his innermost thought": "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop." Professor Honey writes that everyone knew what he meant, because they too faced fear and anxiety every day.

Just as he had said in Montgomery in response to a television reporter's question about the first attempt on his life, he put fear in the perspective of one's commitment to the cause of social justice – and reminded his audience on April 3, 1968, as he had reminded the reporter in Montgomery more than a decade earlier, that certain causes are worth the risk of one's life. He talked about everyone's desire to live a long life, but said that he was "not concerned about that now." He emphasized that God had allowed him to go up to the mountain and to see the promised land. And he said that "while I might not get there with you...we as a people will get to the promised land." Concluding with words from The Battle Hymn of the Republic, he almost collapsed into Reverend Abernathy's arms.

[While it is possible to say that Dr. King painted an image of himself as Moses, this does not seem to be his intent. His story of Moses was simply perfect at the moment, and conveyed the continuum of the social struggle, *and the subordination of any leader to the cause of those who seek freedom from oppression*. He placed the ultimate success of the civil rights struggle above any image of the cause as identified singularly with his leadership – and he did so using the most powerful Biblical story he could use

to make that point. Note: Dr. King's Memorial in Washington, D.C., as originally opened, included the carved phrase: "Tell them that I was a drum major for justice." The phrase could be interpreted to project his own emphasis of the importance of his personal leadership. But it is inaccurate, edited by architects. What Dr. King actually said, in a speech on February 4 about "The Drum Major Instinct," was that "*if you want to say I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice.*" As the Washington Post noted in a recent editorial, that speech was about the folly of wanting to be important, and the evils of self-promotion. The National Park Service has called for a correction. *See the Washington Post, editorial page, September 1, 2011.]*

The next night, April 4, as Dr. King stood on the balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Motel – talking joyfully about going to dinner at the home of Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles, his speech planned for later that night at Mason Temple, and his hope for the Memphis campaign – an assassin's bullet "slammed through his jaw, ripping through his jugular vein and spinal cord." He was thrown flat on his back. He was pronounced dead an hour later at St. Joseph's Hospital.

Reinhold Niebuhr writes that in the desire among oppressed people to fight against their oppression, there may come a time that confining their emotions to the protocol of the institutional powers that control them will be unacceptable. And so it was when Martin was killed. It was impossible for most who had been a part of the civil rights struggle to believe that his death should be attributed to the lonely act of an escaped felon who had a special hatred for him. The white power structure of Memphis represented America's continued unwillingness to embrace equal justice and human dignity, despite President Johnson's famous words in March of 1965 that the cause of Black people in America "should be our cause." Martin's death was so hurtful, and so shocking, that, as Professor Honey writes, his death "burst the dam of whatever patience held back the rage of Black America at Depression-level unemployment; job, housing and school discrimination; pervasive police brutality; useless deaths of black

soldiers in Vietnam; and the plethora of ills that stalked the ghettos.” Thousands of white civil servants fled Washington, D.C., as urban riots erupted there and in Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and other cities. President Johnson called out federal troops, as he called on Congress to enact laws providing aid to cities, job training, and laws mandating nondiscrimination in employment and support for low-income housing. And the murder of Dr. King indeed horrified the world.

[Note: In a single sentence describing the reaction to this tragedy, Professor Honey notes that in New York, black and white garment workers walked off the job to honor Dr. King, without permission of their employers. This sentence took my mind to 1911, when unfettered capitalism, void of governmental demands for worker safety ordinances or regulations, allowed garment factory owners to make alarming demands of female workers at the sewing machines of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Greenwich Village. These female workers, some in their teens, working at such speeds that sewing machine needles pierced their fingers, were locked inside an upper floor of the factory when a fire started. Trapped on a floor that could not be reached by fire department ladders, they burned to death. Their story, and the story of unchecked economic power, is brilliantly retold in the acclaimed documentary “Triangle Fire.”]

Coretta Scott King played an active and important role in the civil rights movement, and she now helped all Americans who respected and cared for Martin honor him in the right way. She did this, Professor Honey writes by demonstrating “her own quiet and steely commitment to nonviolence.” On April 6, she reminded us that Martin “gave his life for the poor of the world, the garbage workers of Memphis, and the peasants of Vietnam. The day that Negro people and others in bondage are truly free, on the day want is abolished, on the day wars are no more, on that day I know my husband will rest in a long-deserved peace.”

The ministers in Memphis, including Rabbi Wax, were moved by the result of their prior ambivalence, to finally confront Loeb about his political and personal intransigence. But, remarkably, he made no commitment on the issues. As U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark declared (amid great skepticism, and anger about the lack of protection for Dr. King) that no evidence existed of any plot to kill Dr. King, President Johnson directed his Under-Secretary of Labor to settle the strike. As Loeb resisted even these federal efforts, and as police continued to physically accost black adults and children in their own housing projects, 9000 people marched on Palm Sunday afternoon, but the rally that took place at the end of the march was characterized by continuing differences in the perspectives of Blacks and Whites. On April 8, a coalition of labor organizations, clergy, political leaders, academics, other local and national civil rights activists, and entertainers, marched with Coretta Scott King and declared their support for the strike. The next day in Atlanta Coretta Scott King led 150,000 people, including the nation's most distinguished political, religious, civic and labor leaders, behind the mule wagon that carried Dr. King's body to its final resting place. Dr. King's mentor, Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays, memorialized Dr. King's life and aspirations just as his wife had:

“The grandson of a slave called on by God to speak to America about war and peace; about social justice and racial discrimination; about its obligation to the poor; and about nonviolence as a way of perfecting social change in a world of brutality.”

On April 12, an agreement was reached, without Loeb's direct involvement or approval, to allow a federal credit union to collect voluntary dues from workers who desired to join the union. The union would represent all workers, whether or not they paid dues, and the city would be allowed to sign an agreement with the union. And, the city agreed to cease excluding black workers from eligibility for promotions solely because of race. No whites were displaced, but when they retired, blacks were at least eligible for those jobs. Thus was created the beginning of an employee-run organization to represent employees as to the terms and conditions of their employment. Subsequently, the city imposed a

garbage tax that disproportionately affected poor whites and blacks, and that would thus sustain negative white attitude toward blacks, and the Mayor would reduce garbage collection from twice to once a week. Wages were eventually increased between 5% and 10%, with white police and firemen benefitting the most, gaining far more in wage increases than the sanitation workers.

In May, Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign did go from the Lorraine Motel to Washington, D.C., but its "Resurrection City" encampments were pounded by rain, and federal commitment to the War remained strong and drew heavily from the nation's tax base.

Epilogue: Professor Honey writes, on behalf of those of us who directly experienced thirteen years of his life, that Dr. King stood unique in his ability to draw together the masses of oppressed people, unions, churches, college students, and national personalities to create a direct action campaign that called the entire nation's attention to social and economic injustice. And, as we anxiously pondered a future without Dr. King's leadership, Professor Honey writes "an assassin shot down Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles on June 6, the night he virtually secured the Democratic Presidential nomination." Many African-Americans had now seen Robert Kennedy as the advocate for peace and economic justice, and he too was now gone. While Local 1733 secured some small gains, by the 1970's union leaders who had been the leaders in this effort had also died, and "conservative forces [in the 1970's and 1980's] rolled back many of the gains of the labor and civil rights movements." As the percentage of the black middle class grew, the percentage of black working poor grew even more. Poverty defined 58% of Memphis' black community in the 1960's. In 1990, that figure had declined by only 10% and "*de facto* school segregation had worsened."

Our challenge, in reading this recollection of Dr. King's last campaign is to be sure that his vision, and the lessons of Memphis, are not now a matter of historical memory, but a source

of knowledge and understanding that will provide a call for leadership and a commitment to equal justice and human dignity, sustained and advanced by the institutions of our government, and our national conscience.

[A committed civil rights worker, Professor Michael Honey notes in his personal preface to his book that his connection with the story of the Memphis strike began in his youth, in Michigan, “the heart of organized labor in the 1960’s.” It was here that he began his support of the civil rights movement, and later while in college, witnessed the Detroit riot and worked in the “Vietnam Summer” campaign that Dr. King initiated, to carry the message that America “would never solve the problems of poverty and racism” until it “stopped spending its fortune on wars abroad.” Commenting boldly on the need for leadership in any campaign for social justice, Professor Honey writes that “on April 4, 1968, we lost the one person in the Movement (as we called it) who could unite a broad range of Americans in favor of racial and economic justice and peace.” Professor Honey is Haley Professor of Humanities and American History at the University of Washington, Tacoma.]