

Statement by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference
Atlanta, Georgia

December 4, 1967

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Last week the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference held one of the most important meetings we have ever convened. We had intensive discussions and analyses of our work and of the challenges which confront us and our nation, and at the end we made a decision which I wish to announce today.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference will lead waves of the nation's poor and disinherited to Washington, D. C., next spring to demand redress of their grievances by the United States government and to secure at least jobs or income for all.

We will go there, we will demand to be heard, and we will stay until America responds. If this means forcible repression of our movement, we will confront it, for we have done this before. If this means scorn or ridicule, we embrace it, for that is what America's poor now receive. If it means jail, we accept it willingly, for the millions of poor already are imprisoned by exploitation and discrimination. But we hope, with growing confidence, that our campaign in Washington will receive at first a sympathetic understanding across our nation, followed by dramatic expansion of nonviolent demonstrations in Washington and simultaneous protests elsewhere. In short, we will be petitioning our government for specific reforms, and we intend to build militant nonviolent actions until that government moves against poverty.

We have now begun preparations for the Washington campaign. Our staff soon will be taking new assignments to organize people to go to Washington from 10 key cities and 5 rural areas. This will be no mere one-day march in Washington, but a trek to the nation's capital by suffering and outraged citizens who will go to stay until some definite and positive action is taken to provide jobs and income for the poor.

We are sending our staff into these key areas to meet with the local leadership of these areas to discuss their readiness to cooperate with us in this venture.

In the coming weeks we will disclose our detailed plans on mobilizing this massive campaign and on the specific proposals which we are formulating.

Today I would like to tell you why the Southern Christian Leadership Conference has decided to undertake this task with the advice and participation we anticipate from other organizations and thousands of individuals.

America is at a crossroads of history, and it is critically important for us, as a nation and a society, to choose a new path and move upon it with resolution and courage.

It is impossible to under-estimate the crisis we face in America. The stability of a civilization, the potential of free government, and the simple honor of men are at stake.

Those who serve in the human-rights movement, including our Southern Christian Leadership Conference, are keenly aware of the increasing bitterness and despair and frustration that threaten the worst chaos, hatred and violence any nation has ever encountered.

In a sense, we are already at war with and among ourselves. Affluent Americans are locked into suburbs of physical comfort and mental insecurity; poor Americans are locked inside ghettos of material privation and spiritual debilitation; and all of us can almost feel the presence of a kind of social insanity which could lead to national ruin.

Consider, for example, the spectacle of cities burning while the national government speaks of repression instead of rehabilitation. Or think of children starving in Mississippi while prosperous farmers are rewarded for not producing food. Or Negro mothers leaving children in tenements to work in neighborhoods where people of color can not live. Or the awesome bombardment, already greater than the munitions we exploded in World War II, against a small Asian land, while political brokers de-escalate and very nearly disarm a timid action against poverty. Or a nation gorged on money while millions of its citizens are denied a good education, adequate health services, decent housing, meaningful employment, and even respect, and are then told to be responsible.

The true responsibility for the existence of these deplorable conditions lies ultimately with the larger society, and much of the immediate responsibility for removing the injustices can be laid directly at the door of the federal government.

This is the institution which has the power to act, the resources to tap, and the duty to respond. And yet, this very government now lacks the will to make reforms which are demanded by a rising chorus across the nation. According to the Harris Poll, for example, a substantial majority of Americans believe that we must proceed at once to tear down and rebuild the slums, and a solid majority feel that everyone should have a job. Concerned leaders of industry, civil-rights organizations, labor unions and churches are joining in such groups as the new Urban Coalition to urge progressive economic measures at the national level. Many urban political leaders are ready to carry out enlightened programs if only the federal government will provide the needed financial support. Newsweek magazine recently devoted an entire issue to the problem of racism in America and set forth some sound proposals for dealing with this situation.

I cite these facts merely to show that a clear majority in America are asking for the very things which we will demand in Washington.

We have learned from hard and bitter experience in our movement that our government does not move to correct a problem involving race until it is confronted directly and dramatically. It required a Selma before the fundamental right to vote was written into the federal statutes. It took a Birmingham before the government moved to open doors of public accommodations to all human beings.

What we now need is a new kind of Selma or Birmingham to dramatize the economic plight of the Negro, and compel the government to act.

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Unrest among the poor of America, and particularly among Negroes, is growing rapidly. In this age of technological wizardry and political immorality, the poor are demanding that the basic need of people be met as the first priority of our domestic programs. Poor people can not long be placated by the glamour of multi-billion-dollar exploits in space. Poor people who encounter racial discrimination every day in every aspect of their lives can not be fooled by patronizing gestures and half-way promises. Poor people who are treated with derision and abuse by an economic system soon conclude with elementary logic that they have no rational interest in killing people 12,000 miles away in the name of defending that system.

We intend to channelize the smouldering rage and frustration of Negro people into an effective, militant and nonviolent movement of massive proportions in Washington and other areas. Similarly, we will be calling on the swelling masses of young people in this country who are disenchanted with this materialistic society, and asking them to join us in our new Washington movement. We also look for participation by representatives of the millions of non-Negro poor--Indians, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachians, and others. And we shall welcome assistance from all Americans of good will.

And so, we have decided to go to Washington and to use any means of legitimate nonviolent protest necessary to move our nation and our government on a new course of social, economic, and political reform. As I said before, the power to initiate this reform resides in Washington. The President and the Congress have a primary responsibility for low minimum wages, for a degrading system of inadequate welfare, for subsidies of the rich and unemployment and underemployment of the poor, for a war mentality, for slums and starvation, and racism. The survival of a free society depends upon the guarantee and survival of freedom and equality. This is what we seek.

In the final analysis, SCLC decided to go to Washington because, if we did not act, we would be abdicating our responsibilities as an organization committed to nonviolence and freedom. We are keeping that commitment, and we shall call on America to join us in our forthcoming Washington campaign. In this way, we can work creatively against the despair and indifference that have so often caused our nation to be immobilized during the cold winter and shaken profoundly in the hot summer.

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