

MLK wasn't murdered because of his civil rights activism alone – it was because he merged it with anti-poverty and anti-war movements

If you think Martin Luther King's story ended with 'I have a dream' speech, think again. To give meaningful time and thought as to the reasons why Martin Luther King was assassinated 50 years ago, on 4 April 1968, is to begin with one critical truth: he was a changed man from the one who delivered his 1963 'I have a dream' speech. Between 1963 and 1968 his political journey, always and forever rooted in his faith and in non-violence, had widened - systemic economic injustice, militarism and growing American neo-imperialist policies was now fused with the civil rights journey, cutting across race, ethnicity, class and geography. As he was to admit, with sadness, the dream of 1963 was born of a sort of naivete and that the dream, in truth, had become a nightmare.

Yet the Dr. King speaking to the March on Washington in 1963, of little black and white children playing together, has been consistently offered up as *the* abiding image - the one-and-only framing of the man. And this makes sense if the purpose then, as now, would be to present King as a relatively non-threatening social and religious leader, only relevant through an historical lens. And why would this be the preferred image to present? Because it very effectively denudes the man and his movement's later challenge to wider American economic and military power. It entirely airbrushes out the latter years of his life (1965-68), as he began to join up these dots, such that he would pose an ever greater threat to LBJ and the white establishment. This stuck-in-the-1963-moment ensures King's deeper relevance for today is well and truly hard to find. It also obscures the story of the assassination itself, of which much has since come to light in the intervening years yet of which little is said.

Had King been allowed to live a long and full life, who knows how his thinking would have further developed and expressed itself. The more one reads of King's writings it reads a moral and political philosopher - one that could only have gone on to share ever greater insight into the human condition. But, given his life was cut short at the age of 39, it seems fair to say that there was nevertheless an inevitability about the political journey he did find himself on – his 1955-1965 civil rights activism in the south progressing to his 1966 Chicago activism and an ever deepening economic framing; and then his 1967/68 calling out his government's Vietnam war machine and by extension, the damage done by western post-imperial interventionist foreign policy. Latterly, King talked repeatedly about all these things. By April 1968, with his Poor People's Campaign, he was mobilising across all parts of civil society both faith and secular. And what's more, as ever, he had an ambitious plan to accompany the campaign. It was called an Economic Bill of Rights and its first demand was a guaranteed minimum income. In all, this 5 point plan was a structure through

which to deliver the radical redistribution of economic resources that would impact on all America.

When that bullet took King's life on April 4 1968, it also drew a veil over the genesis of one of the most visionary efforts in social justice movement building (the Poor People's Campaign planning) and the Economic Bill of Rights, evaporated into the margins of MLK history.

But to know King's journey towards his Economic Bill of Rights in 1968 is to appreciate some of the equally significant yet much overlooked strands of King's political analysis and solutions. Why does this matter? Because Martin Luther King's thinking is relevant to our times today. He would have had *so much* to contribute to our witnessing of and resistance to the four decades of global neoliberal catastrophe. On every score that MLK spoke of in 1968 – poverty, racism, war machine whether domestically or globally – [the facts](#) speak a terrible truth.

We are worse off now than then.

MLK'S JOURNEY

FROM PASTOR IN MONTGOMERY ALABAMA IN 1954 TO THE ECONOMIC BILL OF RIGHTS 1968

1955-65: Desegregation, Boycotts and Marches; Civil Rights (1964) and Voter Rights Acts (1965 & 1968)

MLK and civil rights activism came together somewhat by chance – it hadn't been a course he had set for himself. It was in response to a request by his friend Ralph Abernathy to get involved with the Montgomery bus boycott, which had come to public attention through Rosa Parks' arrest on 1 Dec 1955, for her refusal to move 'to the back of the bus'. Parks was an active member of the NAACP and, after her arrest, Montgomery women had begun to mobilise a bus boycott. King, pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (1954-1960) was in the middle of his PhD, but was selected (after persuasion) to speak on behalf of church leaders and the community with regard to boycott. Thus, as a young man of 26, he went on to lead the city's 50,000 black residents for a year, in the ultimately successful campaign against the policy of racial segregation on the public transit system of Montgomery, Alabama. It was a seminal event in the Civil Rights Movement but King paid a price. The family home in Montgomery was bombed twice – January 1956 when King's wife Coretta was at home with her 10-week old infant daughter, Yolanda and again in February 1957.

King was not deterred – he believed was called to do God's will by exposing institutional racist practises perpetuated by unjust systems and structures. Yet these two attacks had caused him to express the sad belief that he may not live

to see his children grow up. His foreboding of his own untimely death would be with him from this point on.

The massive challenge posed by the all-pervasive racism of the South was to become his life work- a struggle he undertook with his Southern Christian Leadership Conference and his lifelong friend and colleague Ralph Abernathy. The sheer hard slog of this task is powerfully captured in the 3-hour [documentary](#) *'King: A Filmed Record From Montgomery to Memphis'* (*). The film draws together footage from 1955 to 1968 – the entirety of MLK's activism – and leaves the viewer in awe of the sheer scale of the geographical, let alone mammoth political and social agenda that MLK was willing to take on. And every step of the way, he had strategy. The focussed and repeated use of non violent direct action and marching; the use of consumer boycotts (buses, Coca-Cola) the very clear civil and voter rights demands directed at state and federal authorities; the appreciation of the impact of television images broadcast into people's homes; the value of artists expressing solidarity and support for the cause. It is no wonder, that by the mid 1960s, he talks of his utter exhaustion as he moves from one – literal – battle to the next.

But he and his movement turned the South around. In 1964 the Civil Rights Act ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex or national origin and is considered one of the crowning legislative achievements of the civil rights movement. The Voting Rights act was signed into law on August 6, 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson. It outlawed the discriminatory voting practices adopted in many southern states dating back to the Civil War, including literacy tests as a prerequisite to voting. And in 1968, LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, known as the Fair Housing Act and the result of King's work in Chicago, on 11th April - 3 days after MLK's murder and in the wake of riots that followed the assassination.

*[*From [Montgomery to Memphis](#) was made in 1970 to mark the 2nd anniversary of MLK's assassination. A three hour archive compilation, it was directed by Hollywood luminary Sydney Lumet and was screened for one night only across the USA. It has just been released on DVD and [Tipping Point North South](#) is supporting screenings of the film in London throughout 2018.]*

1966: The Move North -Chicago Freedom Movement

King's work wasn't going to end with the battle to desegregate the South. Just six months after the Selma to Montgomery marches and just weeks after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, King brought his protest movement north, to take on the multi-faceted dimensions of racism as experienced by African Americans in urban centres- including again, segregation. The focus was going to be housing where the black community were condemned to live in the worst housing stock; where housing policy itself was practising segregation; and for home owners too, there was bias against them in lending.

Chicago seemed like the perfect battleground. It had been described as 'the Birmingham of the North'. To show his commitment to the northern campaign, King had rented an apartment on the poor West Side. He and his staff arrived in

Chicago, eager to apply his nonviolent approach to social change in a northern city. Once there, King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) joined the locally based Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) to form the Chicago Freedom Movement. The 'open housing' demonstrations they organized were large and met with, in King's words, much more hatred than anything they had faced in the South. The KKK were alive and well in the North and, hard as it seems to comprehend, they were even more hate-filled than their Southern counterparts.

But the demonstrations eventually paid off. An agreement was reached with hardliner Mayor Daley and other city leaders for local real-estate agents to abide by the fair-housing regulations in exchange for an end to protest marches.

Taking the movement north impacted on King's analysis. As he had come to realise, 'it cost the government nothing to desegregate the lunch counters of the south' while on the other hand, it would require millions of tax-dollars to provide decent housing for African Americans in the north - as well as the south. This direct experience chimed with MLK's early critique of capitalism. As a young man of 23, he had written to Coretta Scott King

"I imagine you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic... [Capitalism] started out with a noble and high motive... but like most human systems it fell victim to the very thing it was revolting against. So today capitalism has out-lived its usefulness."

By 1966, now a veteran of social justice campaigning, he references the Chicago slums in a speech to SCLC staff

"You can't talk about solving the economic problem of the Negro without talking about billions of dollars. You can't talk about ending the slums without first saying profit must be taken out of slums. You're really tampering and getting on dangerous ground because you are messing with folk then. You are messing with captains of industry. Now this means that we are treading in difficult water, because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong with capitalism.."

"[W]e are saying that something is wrong ... with capitalism.... There must be better distribution of wealth and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism."

King had studied Marx at university and it's clear that King became ever more sure that a more socialist-leaning economy would deliver a greatly more equitable and just society. In 1967 this would lead him to reach out to other progressive left groups, in the form of the National Conference on New Politics. But he would also say this of his radicalism: he didn't learn it from Karl Marx, he learned it 'from a man named Jesus'.

"I read Das Kapital and The Communist Manifesto years ago when I was a student in college. And many revolutionary movements in the world came into being as a result"

of what Marx talked about. The great tragedy is that Christianity failed to see it had a revolutionary edge. You don't have to go to Karl Marx to learn how to be a revolutionary. I didn't get my inspiration from Karl Marx; I got it from a man named Jesus. From The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr. Edited by Clayborne Carson

1967-68: Vietnam and American Imperialism; the failure of Capitalism and a New Economics

By 1967, the USA was utterly mired in the seemingly never-ending Vietnam War. When asked 'why can't you end this war?' LBJ was reported to say 'I can't. Too many of my friends are making too much money'.

Conscription was falling heavily on young working class men and within that group, disproportionately on African American families. It was draining resources and the American public were starting to turn against the war. They were starting to question the policy logic: that the USA needed to fight the Vietnam war in order to stop the spread of communism in the south-east Asian region.

It wasn't until early 1967 that MLK's attention on Vietnam was brought into sharper focus, through the [photo-journalism](#) of a young American called William Pepper, in the magazine Ramparts. King had seen Pepper's images of the impact of USA bombing on Vietnamese children and asked to meet. This proved to be a political turning point for King – from this moment on, speaking out on Vietnam would start to share an equal footing with his civil rights work. But it made him enemies – there were those in the civil rights movement, including some inside the SCLC who felt it was a distraction at best and a kick in the teeth to LBJ at worst; others who felt it was ground that MLK should not be moving into at all. At this time, NAACP had not come out against the war either. He was told by some that peace and civil rights don't mix.

But witnessing the impact of Vietnam on the black community, as well as the utter disgrace of an ever-inflated military budget while tens of millions of black and white Americans lived in extreme poverty, was more than King could stand. He had spent his life fighting segregation – he said he was not now going to segregate his mind by artificially separating one justice idea from another when in reality, they were linked.

So, on April 4 1967 – a year to the day before his murder – he delivered his speech [Beyond Vietnam: A time to break silence](#) to a packed congregation at the Riverside Church in New York. The selected passages below could be written now.

In 1957, a sensitive American official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. During the past ten years, we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression which has now justified the presence of U.S. military advisors in Venezuela. This need to maintain social stability for our investments, accounts for the counterrevolutionary action of American forces

in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerrillas in Cambodia and why American napalm and Green Beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru.

It is with such activity in mind that the words of the late John F. Kennedy come back to haunt us. Five years ago he said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin...we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

He went on to say

"This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love," he warned. "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

And speaking of the independence movements around the world

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot

people of the land are rising up as never before. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." We in the West must support these revolutions.

As *the* leading moral voice in the USA, all this proved to be dangerous ground. King was now merging race issues with the anti-war and anti-USA imperialism messages. He stood on peace platforms, spoke to the media and went on television to debate Vietnam.

After his April 1967 'Riverside Church Speech' King was pilloried. He was denounced in 168 newspapers, including the liberal northern press, notably the New York Times and Washington Post, both of which had backed his southern civil rights campaign.

As for LBJ, the arch political Machiavelli – a bully of the first degree whose hand was forced by King to act on Southern racism and segregation – on hearing the speech [reportedly remarked](#):

"What is that goddamned nigger preacher doing to me? We gave him the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we gave him the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we gave him the war on poverty. What more does he want?"

If King's truth-speaking to power on civil rights had clearly proven dangerous to his personal safety, then his powerful critique of Vietnam only served to ratchet up his 'threat level' to the state - from the President to the FBI and the Pentagon.

Yet despite the criticisms from within the civil rights movement as well as without, King was to continue his anti-war work. And he was to go further as this 'crossing over' would lead him to work with other movements in his ever-widening analysis of what was wrong with America – and what it would need to put it right.

1967: National Conference for a New Politics in Chicago – a new movement and possible election ticket; The Triple Evils speech on Economic Exploitation, Racism and Militarism

"And one day we must ask the question, 'Why are there forty million poor people in America? And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth.' When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society..." Speech to Southern Christian Leadership Conference Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 1967.

On August 31st 1967 the National Conference on New Politics was convened. Dr. King had asked William Pepper to convene it and the aim was to pull together all the progressive centre left/left groups across the USA. It was a first attempt to explore the possibility of creating a new political party/movement. MLK gave the keynote lecture and one proposal to be explored was a King/Spock ticket to

challenge LBJ at the next election. (Benjamin Spock was a longstanding left activist and friend of King).

We will never know what might have come from the development of these ideas – the conference ended with violence breaking out between some of the groups attending. William Pepper would later write about the event and point the finger at a number of individuals paid by Chicago Mayor Daley to deliberately sabotage the event.

But while the event was brought to a premature end, we do at least have King's landmark [keynote address that became known as his 'Triple Evils' speech](#)- a clear expression of his belief in the inter-connected nature of deep structural problems in society. It addressed racism, materialism, economic exploitation and militarism. Yet again, these passages below are a description of where we find ourselves today – only now, we read this in a truly globalised world where post-crash capitalism and the ever-cut-loose global 1% have combined to push levels of inequality of a scale not even King would have comprehended in 1968.

The second aspect of our afflicted society is extreme materialism...This does not mean that we must turn back the clock of scientific progress...But our moral lag must be redeemed; when scientific power outruns moral power, we end up with guided missiles and misguided men...

It is this moral lag in our thing-oriented society that blinds us to the human reality around us and encourages us in the greed and exploitation which creates the sector of poverty in the midst of wealth. Again we have diluted ourselves into believing the myth that Capitalism grew and prospered out of the protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifice, the fact is that Capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad. If Negroes and poor whites, do not participate in the free flow of wealth within our economy, they will forever be poor, giving their energies, their talents and their limited funds to the consumer market but reaping few benefits and services in return. The way to end poverty is to end the exploitation of the poor, ensure them a fair share of the government services and the nation's resources....

I proposed recently that a national agency be established to provide employment for everyone needing it. Nothing is more socially inexcusable than unemployment in this age. In the (19)30s when the nation was bankrupt, it instituted such an agency, the WPA. In the present conditions of a nation glutted with resources, it is barbarous to condemn people desiring work to soul sapping inactivity and poverty....

The final phase of our national sickness is the disease of militarism. Nothing more clearly demonstrates our nation's abuse of military power than our tragic adventure in Vietnam...

It has frustrated our development at home, telling our own underprivileged citizens that we place insatiable military demands above their critical needs. It has greatly contributed to the forces of reaction in America and strengthened the

military industrial complex. And it has practically destroyed Vietnam and left thousands of American and Vietnamese youth maimed and mutilated and exposed the whole world to the risk of nuclear warfare....

Many of our Senators and Congressmen vote joyously to appropriate billions of dollars for the War in Vietnam and many of these same Senators and Congressmen vote loudly against a Fair Housing Bill to make it possible for a Negro veteran of Vietnam to purchase a decent home. We arm Negro soldiers to kill on foreign battlefields but offer little protection for their relatives from beatings and killings in our own South. We are willing to make a Negro 100% of a citizen in Warfare but reduce him to 50% of a citizen on American soil...

The American people must have an opportunity to vote into oblivion those who cannot detach themselves from militarism, and those that lead us. So we are here because we believe, we hope, we pray that something new might emerge in the political life of this nation which will produce a new man, new structures and new institutions and a new life for mankind. I am convinced that this new life will not emerge until our nation undergoes a radical revolution of values. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people the giant triplets of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy...

A nation that continues year after year, to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. So what we must all see is that these are revolutionary times...

Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world, declaring eternal opposition to poverty, racism and militarism...

1968: Committee of 100, The Poor People's Campaign & the Economic Bill of Rights

By 1968, Dr. King was pushing for something much more radical than 'the dream' of 1963. By now he profoundly knew from his personal experience that

'Freedom is never voluntarily granted by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed'

He argued:

"I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective – the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed matter: the guaranteed income... The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty." – Where do We Go from Here?, 1967.

Thus King's 'last great exertion' in 1967/68 was the [Poor People's Campaign](#) and its Economic Bill of Rights. *The Poor People's Campaign* was a mass movement call for the Poor People's March on Washington planned for summer 1968. It was a more radical successor to the 1963 March on Washington and called for an occupation – Resurrection City – a tented community of tens of thousands that would stay until they got their demands implemented.

Mobilizing black, white, Hispanic and Native American it was to demand an annual \$30bn federal investment to deliver full employment, guaranteed annual income, at least 300,000 units of low cost housing per year.

On sharing the idea with some of his church supporters, one said: 'He had done all these other social things but this was the culmination...it was embarking on the financial structure of the country...it was then we understood that Martin Luther King was a revolutionary'. (*Martin Luther King, A Life, by Marshall Frady*)

It was planned that the Campaign would start early in 1968. It was ambitious and many felt it was over-ambitious, almost impossible to deliver and therefore doomed to fail. But King remained faithful to the vision.

The April 16 edition of USA 'Look' magazine carried a posthumous article from King titled "[Showdown for Nonviolence](#)", his last statement on the Poor People's Campaign. The article warned of imminent social collapse and suggested that the Campaign presents government with what may be its last opportunity to achieve peaceful change—through an [Economic Bill of Rights](#).

Just three weeks after Dr King's death, the Committee of 100 – set up to lobby on behalf of the campaign- called for just this. On 12th May 1968 Ralph Abernathy, King's chosen successor to head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, went forward with the Poor People's Campaign. Coretta Scott King brought 5,000 demonstrators to Washington, DC, seeking an Economic Bill of Rights. "Resurrection City," a shantytown, was constructed on the Mall to house many of the visitors who met with congressman and senators to plead their case.

But there was fear at the most senior levels of government. 20,000 army soldiers were activated and prepared for a military occupation of the capital should the Poor People's Campaign pose a threat. The fear in Washington's corridors of power was that this movement could turn into revolution. But the truth was, with King gone, the movement had taken an immediate fatal blow and would not recover. King's belief that you had to tackle all three 'evils' together in order to rid society of each one - economic exploitation, racism and militarism- had been hard enough to advocate, but now he was gone, the task seemed beyond the movement. Figures from the 1960 census, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Commerce Department, and the Federal Reserve had estimated that anywhere from 40 to 60 million Americans—or 22 to 33 percent—lived below the [poverty line](#). King had said that "the highest patriotism demands the

ending of the war and the opening of a bloodless war to final victory over racism and poverty".

MLK's [vision for economic transformation](#) has still yet to be realised – but his description of the benefits of what we today would understand as the 'new' concept of Universal Basic Income, remains alive as ever:

'A host of positive psychological changes inevitably will result from widespread economic security. The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement. There is nothing except short-sightedness to prevent us from guaranteeing an annual minimum – and liveable – income for every American family. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty.'

1968: April 4 The Lorraine Motel

King's life was taken on the evening of April 4th at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. He was in the city to support the striking sanitation workers –King's presence was part of the lead up to the Poor People's Campaign. He had delivered what was to be his final speech the night before – his ['Mountaintop Speech'](#). Before concluding with those famous lines 'I may not get there with you' he calls on the audience to support boycotting of brands Coca Cola and Wonder Bread for their prejudiced hiring policy; to pull their money out of mainstream banks to put into pro-black community savings and loans; and with insurance policies to think about supporting black insurance businesses. He called for 'a kind of dangerous unselfishness'. But also, the impending sense of his own mortality is painful and clear in this sermon. He wouldn't know, but he had less than 24 hours to live.

When we celebrate Dr. King's birthday on MLK Day every 15 January, we give thanks for the life of Martin Luther King. To watch MLK's 1963 March on Washington speech is to recognise the greatness of a young 33 year old black pastor preaching hard truths to the heart of America through a conscience-shifting sermon cheered on by 100,000 in the Washington Mall. A speech that was to energise the last push for long, long overdue civil and voting rights laws.

But to mark his murder on April 4th 1968 requires a different lens. It's not to be mixed up with MLK Day or the 1963 March on Washington. It needs to be understood in terms of the threat King posed to the USA in 1968, with cities rioting, the war spiralling out of control and LBJ's 'war on poverty' losing out to war spending. In this context, America's leading moral voice was becoming *even more* outspoken as he talked of imminent social collapse, merging issues of race with economy and blistering anti-war rhetoric.

And so April 4th demands we dig deeper into the circumstances that removed this brave spirit, brilliant mind and towering moral leader from public life. We owe this to the vision King sacrificed his life for. We owe it to him to push back on the mainstream media complacency still relays the story that a petty, racist

crook, James Earl Ray was the man who fired the gun and acted alone, when the evidence shows otherwise.

If not James Earl Ray, then who?

Many years after King's murder, William Pepper, the young photo journalist who was first introduced to King through his Vietnam photo-journalism and who then went on to co-ordinate the 1967 National Conference for a New Politics, was called by Ralph Abernathy. Profoundly disillusioned after the slaying, Pepper had left activism and politics to study for the bar. He was now a lawyer. Abernathy said he and Coretta Scott King wanted Pepper – in his legal capacity – to interview Ray (in prison), because they had concerns about the conviction and the fact that there had been no trial (because Ray had pled guilty).

Pepper has since pieced together the entire story by painstaking investigation over two decades and, critically, with the full support of the King family. There are those who have, and continue to, challenge Pepper's findings and this is as it should be, but Pepper's expansive body of work demands attention, since his evidence connects the Memphis Police Department, senior FBI figures, USA military personnel and Memphis organised crime. It argues that Ray was certainly part of the plan to kill King, but explains how and why Ray was not the man who fired the gun.

As part of this investigation in 1988 and to mark the 20th anniversary of the assassination, the BBC's flagship current affairs/documentary strand 'Inside Story' produced [Who Killed Martin Luther King](#). It presented Pepper's work up to that point (since then much expanded) and making the case that the assassination did not begin and end with Ray. Pepper's investigation continued on, gathering ever more evidence.

Five years later, in 1993 and frustrated by the unwillingness of the authorities to re-try Ray on the basis of new evidence, it was suggested a 'mock trial' be organised, adhering to all the rules of an actual trial including jury selection. It was televised by HBO and the jury found Ray not guilty. King's youngest son, Dexter, met with James Earl Ray in March 1997 and subsequently said, "In the name of truth and justice, our family is calling for a trial, a trial James Earl Ray never had. ...I don't think his trial—if he is granted a trial—will necessarily give us the unequivocal proof, but at least in regard to new evidence, we will know more than we do now.'

And in 1999, following Ray's death, Pepper represented the King family in a wrongful death lawsuit, "*King family vs. Lloyd Jowers and other unknown co-conspirators*". Lloyd Jowers was the owner of the bar/grill, from the rear of which King was shot. Pepper produced over seventy witnesses. Jowers, testifying by deposition, stated that James Earl Ray was a scapegoat, not involved in the assassination and that Memphis police officer Earl Clark fired the fatal shots. On December 8, 1999, the Memphis jury found Jowers responsible, and also found

that the assassination plot included "governmental agencies." The jury took less than an hour to find in favour of the King family for the requested sum of \$100.

With the enormous body of evidence accumulated by Pepper over the past 50 years; vitally, with the King family supporting this work because they themselves believe Ray was not acting alone and was wrongly convicted as being the assassin; with rare but nevertheless valid media attempts every decade or two to put all this information out there, how come it's still the commonly perpetuated 'truth' that James Earl Ray was the assassin?

It fell to Robert Kennedy to announce the death of Martin Luther King to the world. Kennedy was running for the presidency. Three months later, he too would be assassinated. Between 1963 and 1968 the world saw the USA lose to assassination President Kennedy (Nov 1963), two towering black leaders Malcolm X (Feb 1965) Martin Luther King (April 1968) and Presidential candidate Robert Kennedy (July 1968). LBJ did not stand again and Richard Nixon defeated Democrat Hubert Humphrey to elected President in November 1968.

His global legacy: MLK's radicalism and present day relevance needs to be much more widely understood

'You can kill the dreamer but you can't kill the dream'. Martin Luther King

As we approach the 50th anniversary of that terrible day, we must make every effort to remember MLKs activism and legacy *in the round* and not simplistically through the prism of the past. His analysis speaks to the present day - you cannot separate economic exploitation from racism from militarism; economic and consumer boycotts and marches matter – especially in the context of a long term strategy; and that such struggles are lifelong, require commitment and often-times courage.

Over the 13 years of his activism, King tirelessly marched and mobilised; he never stopped writing – sermons, articles, books; year in year out he preached across the south; he was often seen on TV and across the print media; he travelled to India, Ghana, the Caribbean and Europe; he took on the southern racists, he took on the northern racism in cities like Chicago; he faced down LBJ and J Edgar Hoover. He was the victim of an attempted murder through stabbing; his home bombed twice and imprisoned more than a dozen times.

And this also must be acknowledged - throughout these 13 years of activism, Coretta Scott King was by his side at marches and rallies, through the terrible times as well as the wins. MLK changed America forever and it was Coretta Scott King who would continue his work after his death.

But what of the intervening period since King's murder?

The neoliberal project, which began life as a USA/UK ideological endeavour, has been successfully globalised. Its goal to privatise, deregulate, destroy organised labour and roll back the state has triumphed. Government no longer works for the citizen – its role has been switched. It now functions to serve private interests, offshore interests and big business. During this period, the global south has had to apply the same policies and to the same end – only without the safety nets that western economies had developed in the immediate post war period to fall back on. Safety nets (public service health and education, social security, public housing) they have been prevented from developing, thanks to decades of odious neoliberal policies enforced upon them in exchange for western aid or loans.

King's position? The progressive global citizen and citizenry, working in unity, is the way forward.

A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies....This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind." Beyond Vietnam 1967

Today, identity politics rubs up against intersectionality. There is no question that vested political, corporate and media interests work against individual groups within our wider communities. We see this manifest itself in myriad ways through race, gender, ethnicity or faith based oppression and found at all levels of society - local, regional, national or international.

But, at what was to be the end of his life, King believed that there is another parallel fundamental truth: that to challenge such power successfully we need each other to support each other and that we are way more powerful when we recognise this. As he wrote to labour leader Cesar Chavez, "our separate struggles are really one."

King's life was taken from him precisely because of the power and the danger of this belief – our separate struggles are really one. Anti-war and anti-poverty mobilisations across race and ethnicity was not the direction the political and military establishment foresaw King going in. And it only served to further anger the white supremacists, north and south. By the time of his death, King's popularity had slumped and across black America too. Nevertheless, the only way to permanently remove this man of non-violence was through the barrel of a gun.

At the National Conference for a New Politics, he had offered this challenge – one that he knowingly was prepared to sacrifice his own life for.

'I want to say to you tonight that I intend to keep these issues mixed because they are mixed. Somewhere we must see that justice is indivisible, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere and I have

fought to long and to hard against segregated public accommodations to end up at this point in my life, segregating my moral concerns. So let us stand in this convention knowing that on some positions; cowardice asks the questions, is it safe?; expediency asks the question, is it politic?; vanity asks the question, is it popular?; but conscience is asks the question, is it right?. And on some positions, it is necessary for the moral individual to take a stand that is neither safe, nor politic nor popular; but he must do it because it is right. And we say to our nation tonight, we say to our Government, we even say to our FBI, we will not be harassed, we will not make a butchery of our conscience, we will not be intimidated and we will be heard.'

Deborah Burton & Dionne Gravesande

MLK Global

Notes:

For a clear understanding of King's philosophy and non-violence the fundamental tenets are described in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*. The six principles are summarised here <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>

The memory of the Poor People's Campaign never died. In the USA it has been marked in various ways ever since. [The Kairos Center](#) started its own [PPC](#) to mobilise USA grassroots groups around the urgent call to end poverty where-ever it exists.

About MLK GLOBAL Tipping Point North South launched MLK Global in 2017. It seeks to raise awareness about Dr.King's call for an end to poverty, racism and militarism and to do this through his Economic Bill of Rights, updated for today.

<https://mlkglobal.org/2017/11/23/an-end-to-poverty-racism-militarism/>

<https://mlkglobal.org/2017/11/23/dr-kings-econ-bill-of-rights-revived/>

It launches its MLK Global Statement to promote both these calls on April 4 2018.

<https://mlkglobal.org/mlk-global-statement/endorsements/>

Please email Deborah@tippingpointnorthsouth.org if your organisation would like to sign on.

[Tipping Point North South](#) is a non-profit co-operative that supports and initiates creative campaign-driven projects that support the global social justice agenda. It works across film, events and campaigns.

Projects include cinema documentaries [We Are Many](#) and [Open Bethlehem](#); Bethlehem Unwrapped ([festival](#), [WALL & short film](#)); Make Apartheid History ([Animation](#) and [video gallery](#)); [Attlee Nation & Festival](#)