BLACK, BROWN AND POOR:

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN

AND ITS LEGACIES

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Abstract

Envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1967, the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) represented a bold attempt to revitalize the black freedom struggle as a movement explicitly based on class, not race. Incorporating African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and poor whites, the PPC sought a broad coalition to travel to Washington, D.C., and pressure the government to fulfill the promise of the War on Poverty. Because of King's death and the campaign's subsequent premature end amid rain-driven, ankle-deep mud and just a few, isolated policy achievements, observers then and scholars since have dismissed the campaign as not only a colossal failure, but also the death knell of the modern freedom struggle.

Using a wide range of sources – from little-used archives and Federal Bureau of Investigation files to periodicals and oral histories – this project recovers the broader significance of the campaign. Rejecting the paradigm of success and failure and placing the PPC in the broader context of the era's other social movements, my analysis opens the door to the larger complexity of this pivotal moment of the 1960s. By highlighting the often daunting obstacles to building an alliance of the poor, particularly among blacks and ethnic Mexicans, this study prompts new questions. How *do* poor people emancipate themselves? And why do we as scholars routinely *expect* poor people to have solidarity across racial and ethnic lines? In fact, the campaign did spark a tentative but serious conversation on how to organize effectively across these barriers. But the PPC also assisted other burgeoning social movements, such as the Chicano movement, find their own voices on the national scene,

build activist networks, and deepen the sophistication of their own power analyses, especially after returning home. Not only does this project challenge the continued dominance of a black-white racial framework in historical scholarship, it also undermines the civil rights master narrative by exploring activism after 1968. In addition, it recognizes the often-competing, ethnic-driven social constructions of poverty, and situates this discussion at the intersection of the local and the national.

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groups such as SNCC working with local people. But in Washington, SCLC was building the campaign from scratch.[47]

From the end of January to the beginning of March, Lafayette, Houck, and Austin directed an effort to contact literally thousands of people to compile a list of interested organizations and individuals. Lafayette recalls that they had little time to get to know other ethnic leaders in a casual manner – "It wasn't gradual … it was real fast" – and thus, the relationships were often superficial. At first, they relied on lists and contacts from organizations that came on board early, including the American Friends Service Committee, the United Church of Christ (of which Andrew Young was a minister), the World Council of Churches, and the Spring Mobilization Committee. AFSC proved particularly helpful due to its deep contacts among American Indians and ethnic Mexicans, often stemming from shared interests in peace. AFSC's presence in Denver, for instance, helped bring on board Corky Gonzales and Tillie Walker, director of the United Scholarship Service, an education support agency for Indians and ethnic Mexicans. A Mandan originally from South Dakota, Walker in turn proved enthusiastic in tapping into her vast Indian network for the campaign. Also, the Highlander Folk School's Myles Horton and Guy Carawan, activists who had worked with SCLC and SNCC since the 1950s, proved indispensable in reaching poor

[47] Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon; and Ernie Austin, interview by Kay Shannon, July 6, 1968, in Washington, D.C., MSRC. For criticism of SCLC's exploitation of existing grassroots work, see Carson, *In Struggle*, 62-63, 153-164; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 92-93, 99; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 558, 578-579; Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 305, 445-446; and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 282-283, 345-346.

whites in Appalachia and elsewhere. Houck estimated that, by mid-March, they had written some 10,000 letters and telegrams to potential supporters and had made "a couple of thousand dollars worth of phone calls."[48]

But throughout these efforts, King remained concerned that mobilization was moving too slowly, and that organizers recruited mainly middle-class leaders and not hard-core poor people. During an action team meeting in early February, he chastised Lafayette and others on their recruiting:

> We have not recruited twenty folks that are people who will go and stay with us. I am disturbed about the fact that our staff has not gotten to the people we are talking about – not young people, middle-class people, etc., but the hard-core poor people. … We can get a lot of people there; that is not the problem. But the much greater thing is for us to get the poor people who will be demanding something because they have been deprived.[49]

As a result, King called at least two emergency meetings, in mid-January and again in mid-February, for all staff to discuss how they could improve mobilization – otherwise, he said that he would consider canceling the march. One outcome was the proposal to bring together representatives from interested organizations – particularly non-black groups – to discuss the goals and origins of the upcoming campaign.

[48] Quote by Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon. Also, Bernard Lafayette, interview by author; Ernie Austin, interview by Shannon; Barbara Moffett memo to Warren Witte, February 23, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32557, "Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials - Regional, 1968," and Steve Cary memo, February 9, 1968, and Eleanor Eaton memo to Barbara Moffett, February 26, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32556, "Poor People's Campaign: General, Planning Materials," all in AFSC; and Pam Coe, of AFSC's American Indian Program, letter to Tom Houck, March 1, 1968, Box 177, Folder 18, SCLC. In addition to listing Indian organizations to contact, Coe suggested that to increase turnout for the Minority Group Conference, it should be in Denver or Chicago.

[49] "Action Committee Meeting" transcript, February 11, 1968, Box 34, Folder 15, KP.

Chapter Four

Indians, Whites and Puerto Ricans: The 'Forgotten' Marchers

"I think the biggest problem (is) that this is a black movement.
And this is the biggest problem that we've faced throughout the whole campaign."

- Tillie Walker, American Indian leader[1]

Of all the images produced by the Poor People's Campaign in the spring and summer of 1968, none perhaps was more arresting than that of hundreds of protesters milling around the U.S. Supreme Court building, banging on its doors, breaking windows, and singing Indian chants and "La Cucaracha." Although not immune from lively demonstrations, the high court generally received more praise and respect in public opinion than its executive and legislative counterparts, and, with that, often a little more decorum when people did disagree with court decisions. But on this day in late May, the crowd proved boisterous in its protests against the court's recent affirmation of curbs on American Indian fishing rights in the Northwest. Demanding a meeting with a representative of the court, the protesters eventually chose a delegation including Ralph Abernathy, Corky Gonzales, Reies Tijerina, fishing rights advocate Hank Adams, and sixteen other Indian activists to speak with Chief Clerk John Davis. They presented Davis with a petition laying out their grievances regarding how state fishing laws and quotas denied certain tribes the

[1] Tillie Walker, director of United Scholarship Service, interview by Kay Shannon, July 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

ability to sustain their communities through traditional tribal means and violated century-old treaties with the U.S. government. Of most immediate interest was the release of twenty-four demonstrators from a recent "fish-in." The meeting ended hours later with no resolution.[2]

While activists interpreted the meeting as a triumph because someone was willing to listen, the petition's substance and the participation of Indian leadership received little attention. Instead, media and subsequent scholarly interpretations of the demonstration outside of the Supreme Court building focused on the unruly crowd. Condemning the court protest as "foolish," "illegal," and "violent," editorial pages concluded that if PPC participants did not recognize the protest as a bad idea, its leaders should have.[3] "Poor people have poor ways," intoned the *Washington Post*, but Abernathy, the editors argued, should have known better.[4] Front page news stories emphasized conflict, such as the arrest of three people for lowering the U.S. flag in the plaza of the court to half-staff. Although no arrests were made in the much-publicized breaking of five basement windows, several Chicano teenagers were charged with disorderly conduct after police officers on motorcycles broke the marchers' ranks. Moreover, press reports liberally quoted Abernathy and Tijerina far more than their Indian counterparts. One exception was Hank Adams, an Assiniboine-Sioux and a member of the National Indian Youth Council. But instead of identifying the

[2] *Washington Post*, May 30, 1968; *New York Times*, May 30, 1968; and *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1968. On public support of the court, see Gregory A. Caldeira and James L. Gibson, "The Etiology of Public Support for the Supreme Court," *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (1992): 635-664.

[3] *Washington Post*, May 31, 1968; *Time*, June 7, 1968; and *New York Times*, May 30, 1968.

[4] *Washington Post*, May 31, 1968.

college-educated and bespectacled Adams as a native spokesman for fishing and treaty rights, the *Washington Post* called him "a white leader for Indian rights."[5] Perhaps his English-sounding name and the absence of a headdress confused the reporter. Indeed, the few images of people identified as Indians from the protest were of older men and women such as George Crow Flies High wearing headdresses and other traditional garb.[6] Scholars subsequently have echoed much of their media counterparts' treatment of the protest – that is if historians address it at all.[7]

This scenario suggests in many ways the dilemma in which non-black activists found themselves during the Poor People's Campaign and often in politics at large. The protest and its aftermath highlighted the difficulty in finding space in a public discourse dominated by black and white, in which black meant poor and white meant privileged. This most often led to a general ignorance of or misunderstanding of a group's distinct issues, and the presumption that the African American vision and its corresponding policy positions applied to all. While ethnic Mexicans experienced this marginalization by the media and SCLC leadership, their overall numbers and control of the Hawthorne School allowed them some influence in the campaign. For the smaller contingents of Americans Indians, poor

[5] *Washington Post*, May 30, 1968.

[6] *New York Times*, May 30, 1968; *Los Angeles Times*, May 30-31, and June 2, 1968; *Time*, June 7, 1968; *U.S. News & World Report*, June 10, 1968; and *People's World*, June 15, 1968. For a broader discussion of the media's narrow framing of the campaign, see Chapter Five.

[7] See Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 55; McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 131; and Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, 189-200. The protest goes unmentioned in Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*; and Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*. The work of Robert Chase and Daniel Cobb are exceptions to this larger trend. Chase, "Class Insurrection"; and Cobb, "Talking the Language of the Larger World," in *Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900*, ed. Daniel M. Cobb and Loretta Fowler (Sante Fe, N.M.: School for Advanced Research, 2007), 161-177.

Appalachian whites, and Puerto Ricans, however, the challenge of having their voices heard proved much harder. Not only were their issues treated as secondary, but both African American and, to a lesser extent, ethnic Mexican spokesmen compounded the problem by attempting to speak *for* these smaller groups.

Such experiences led most historians of the modern American Indian, Appalachian, and Puerto Rican struggles to disregard the Poor People's Campaign as solely a black endeavor, one with little significance for non-black activists.[8] Indeed, interactions between

[8] On Indian activism, see Charles Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005), 129-130, and *Messages from Frank's Landing: A Story of Salmon, Treaties and the Indian Way* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 59; Troy Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination and the Rise of Indian Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Alvin M. Josephy, Joane Nagel and Troy Johnson, eds., *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971; 1999); and Donna Hightower Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s," *Hypatia* 18 (2003): 114-132. On activism among poor whites from Appalachia, see Chad Montrie, *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); David E. Whisnant, *Modernizing the Moutaineer: People, Power and Planning in Appalachia* (Appalachian Consortium Press, 1980; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994); Thomas J. Kiffmeyer, "From Self-Help to Sedition: The Appalachian Volunteers in Eastern Kentucky, 1964-1970," *Journal of Southern History* 64 (1998): 65-94; John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); and John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). On Puerto Rican community formation and activism, broadly defined, see Gina M. Pérez, *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement and Puerto Rican Families* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Carmen Teresa Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Whalen and Victor Vásquez-Hernández, eds., *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Judson Jeffries, "From Gang-bangers to Urban Revolutionaries: The Young Lords of Chicago," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 96 (2003): 288-304; Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983; 1994); Andrés Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the New York Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Torres and José Velásquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago*; and Johanna L. Fernandez, "Radicals in the Late 1960s: A History of the Young Lords Party in New York City, 1969-1974" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2004).

African Americans and activists in these other movements only have begun to receive their scholarly due.[9] Just a handful of studies – all in American Indian history – have treated the campaign as noteworthy, albeit in contrasting ways. In a now-classic discussion of Indian-black interaction, activist-scholar Vine Deloria Jr. suggested that the campaign compelled traditional tribal councils to take seriously the challenges and issues posed by younger Indians. "One good tangible result of Indian participation in the Poor People's Campaign is that Indian people all over have begun to question the nature of their situation," argued Deloria. "They are asking what their specific rights and benefits are and what the Poor People's March could possibly do to improve their situation."[10] In contrast, Daniel Cobb depicts Indian participation in the campaign as the *end* of an era of reformist activism devoted to compelling the government to treat "the indigenous peoples within its borders

[9] Sherry L. Smith explores the role of other movements in the fishing rights protests of the mid-1960s. "Indians, Counter Culture and the New Left," in *Beyond Red Power*, eds. Cobb and Fowler, 142-160. In more general terms, scholars such as Paul Chaat Smith, Robert Allen Warrior, Charles Wilkinson, and Troy Johnson discuss Indian appreciation of black civil rights strategies. See footnote 8. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, a historian of the Black Power movement, proves far more specific in his analysis, particularly regarding the Black Panthers' impact on other radical ethnic organizations, including the American Indian Movement and, most extensively, the Puerto Rican Young Lords. See Ogbar, *Black Power*, Chapter 6, and "*Puerto Rico En Mi Corazon*: The Young Lords, Black Power, and Puerto Rican Nationalism in the U.S.," *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 18 (2006): 148-169. Johanna Fernandez also touches on Black Power's impact on the Young Lords. See "Radicals in the Late 1960s"; and "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City," in *Freedom North*, eds. Theoharis and Woodard, 255-285.

[10] Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1969), 187.

with justice and honor."[11] Rather than prompt new questions, the campaign's disappointments ushered in new strategies to answer age-old questions.[12]

A careful study of the campaign suggests that the experience of PPC participants indeed proved instructive to those Indians, poor whites, and Puerto Ricans who chose to attend – and even those who did not. This chapter argues that while the PPC offered great potential for interethnic collaboration, it more times than not highlighted the different social constructions of poverty among these smaller contingents in contrast to the priorities of African Americans, ethnic Mexicans, and each other. Common ground was sometimes found, outside the Supreme Court building, inside the Hawthorne School, or within the thousands of small discussions and interactions held that spring and summer. But the campaign also produced lessons about how *not* to organize – particularly SCLC's top-down model – and in the process strengthened the intra-ethnic resolve necessary to seek new solutions in the face of a recalcitrant government apparatus and narrow media framing, without totally giving up on earlier efforts such as court action. Thus, the campaign offered not a break or a new beginning for American Indians, poor whites, or Puerto Ricans, but an important bridge to the more hard-nosed activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s epitomized by the American Indian Movement and the Young Lords Organization.

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[11] Cobb, "Talking the Language of the Larger World," 162.

[12] Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 168-196; and Cobb, "Talking the Language of the Larger World," 172-173. For the complexity of black and Indian identities and culture and how they have been inextricably linked and overlapping since the sixteenth century, see James F. Brooks' collection, *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

Of all the ethnic groups that Martin Luther King Jr. sought out to participate in the campaign, American Indians were the most wary of becoming involved. One reason was that King and SCLC had few contacts among those active in Indian issues, with the exception of black comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory, who had supported fishing rights protests in Washington state. Another more fundamental cause was that while King saw Indians as yet another group of poor people exploited by a white-dominated power structure, many Indian tribal leaders were deeply suspicious of – even hostile to – civil rights goals and strategies. In fact, many of these tribal leaders viewed black interests and demands as not just fundamentally different from Indian concerns, but nearly complete opposites: blacks sought a certain level of acceptance within the white-dominated economy and polity, while Indians wanted what Vine Deloria called "tribal existence within the homeland reservation" in order to protect their culture and unique autonomy.[13] Of course, some Indians advocated a form of assimilation. But overall a more balanced "tribal existence" remained the dominant response to 100 years of white oppression, from attempts to assimilate Indians by force through the Dawes Severalty Act and boarding schools in the nineteenth century, to the urban relocation of Indian communities and termination of federal reservation support in the twentieth century.[14]

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[13] Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 183.

[14] Cobb, "Continuing Encounters: Historical Perspectives" and "Talking the Language of the Larger World," in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 57-69, 171. For more on these policies, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995); Ruth Spack, *America's Second Tongue: American Indian Education and the Ownership of English, 1860-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Vine

By the late 1960s, media-driven images of the black freedom struggle had reinforced a lasting negative impression on Indian observers and subsequently shaped their responses to the Poor People's Campaign. Some Indians simply "didn't want to get involved with the black people," recalled Victor Charlo, a Salish and eventual SCLC staff member during the campaign. News footage over several years had done little to discourage Indian suspicions. While a 1963 March on Washington dominated by black and whites conflated legal equality with cultural conformity, television cameras captured looters carrying electronics out of the stores every summer since 1964. Indians "trying to understand Civil Rights" were "completely turned off," wrote Vine Deloria. " ... America, rioters seemed to be saying, is a color TV and this is what we want from her."[15] Clearly, such impressions greatly oversimplified the far more varied and nuanced approaches African Americans used to achieve social justice, including those who stressed black control of their communities, politics, and institutions. Yet such generalized impressions of black activism and motives persisted among many Indians. The standard-bearer in pan-Indian advocacy since 1944, the National Congress of Indians (NCAI) fiercely protected Indians' reputation within the Johnson administration as the only ethnic group not to demonstrate, let alone riot, in hopes of a policy reward. NCAI even had a banner declaring "Indians Don't Demonstrate"

Deloria Jr. and Clifford Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Donald L. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000); and James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945-1975* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

[15] Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 186.

proudly hanging at its headquarters – one more way to differentiate the cause of Indians from their black counterparts.[16]

Even those who consciously credited civil rights protests as inspiration to their own organizing consistently distanced themselves from the goals, if not the means of, black activism. For instance, the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) had formed in response to what younger activists viewed as NCAI's overreliance on holding meetings and workshops while doing little else to advocate Indian interests. In 1961, after finding a Chicago conference on Indian affairs lacking in creative action, about a dozen young, college-educated Indians from several tribes gathered in Gallup, New Mexico, to launch "not an organization, but a movement," said Mel Thom, a Paiute from Nevada and the council's first president, He added that, "Organizations rearrange history. Movements make history."[17] Thom, jokingly called Mao-Tse Thom by friends, viewed NIYC as a blend of old and new tribal cultures. Although also inclined to hold meetings and workshops more than anything else, NIYC's youthful potential represented a bold, new direction -- the group met on reservations rather than in cities and it incorporated tribal rituals in a more fundamental way into their meetings. NIYC's willingness to consider other ways to organize became even clearer after co-founder and Ponca activist Clyde Warrior brought Marlon Brando to speak to the group's annual conference in 1963. Attendees rejected the actor's suggestion to join African American civil rights protests, echoing Deloria's argument that African

[16] Cobb, "Talking the Language of the Larger World," in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 171; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 37. See also Thomas W. Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians: The Founding Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 126-149.

[17] Stan Steiner, *The New Indians* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 40.

Americans sought a fundamentally different relationship with the dominant white culture than Indians did. But the model of direct action protest illustrated by civil rights activists that summer was attractive to at least some NIYC members, including Warrior and an already seasoned 19-year-old activist named Hank Adams.[18]

Despite the caution shown by Mel Thom and other NIYC "moderates" toward direct action and its ties to the black movement, such protest was not without recent precedent among some tribes. In the late 1950s, there were at least twenty major demonstrations or nonviolent protests by Indians to protect their land, stop termination, and challenge alleged white brutality and insensitivity in white-Indian interactions. Members of the Six Nations (or Iroquois Confederacy), for instance, used direct action protest to oppose several state projects in New York, with Tuscarora Chief Wallace "Mad Bear" Anderson, a World War II veteran, leading the way. On the grounds of Indian sovereignty, hundreds marched to the Massena, New York, courthouse in 1959 and ripped up summonses for nonpayment of state taxes. In an argument that he echoed nine years later during the Poor People's Campaign, Anderson told a state official that, "The state does not have the right to govern the Indian people. The only law the Indians recognize is the treaties made with the Federal Government."[19] A year earlier, Tuscaroras blocked trucks and harassed government employees, successfully deflecting state tactics to buy their land to build a reservoir and

[18] Minutes of the National Indian Youth Council founding conference, August 10-11, 1961, Box 1, Folder 1, Records of the National Indian Youth Council, Center for Southwest Research, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, N.M. (hereafter known as NIYC); Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 42-44; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 39-42; and Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians*, 126-149.

[19] *New York Times*, January 27, 1959.

backflood area. While Tuscaroras deflated tires and blocked roads with fallen trees, Senecas and Mohawks camped on the disputed land. After the state eventually backed down, Miccosukees in Florida called on Anderson to help them repulse a government attempt to take thousands of acres for the Everglades Reclamation Project. Anderson also joined one hundred other Six Nations members in a demonstration outside of the White House. Yet scholars note that these protests were basically intra-tribal in nature, considering the centuries-long history of cooperation among the members of the Six Nations. Although separate tribes technically, they long had acted as one. In contrast, most other tribes did not have this tradition, making NIYC's turn to pan-Indian direct action that much more significant.[20]

NIYC did not embrace direct action in the fall of 1963, ironically because of its dedication to a decision-making process similar to SNCC, one based upon consensus and respect for all involved. Not until early 1964, when the more "timid stayed away," did Clyde Warrior persuade the council to commit itself to direct action protest, most prominently the "fish-ins" in the Pacific Northwest.[21] For the small Puyallup, Quinault, Muckleshoot, and Nisqually tribes in Washington state, fishing rights had become a central issue of their survival. Federal treaties long had guaranteed Indian rights to fish in traditional places off the reservation, an economic and cultural necessity if they wanted to maintain practices

[20] *New York Times*, July 4, 1958, January 27 and March 14-15, 19-20, 1959, and December 23, 1985; *Washington Post*, March 20, 1959; Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 37-38; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 45; and Guy B. Senese, *Self Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 146-147.

[21] Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 44.

handed down by their ancestors. But slowly state and local governments had chipped away at their ability to do so legally. By the early 1960s, game officials routinely arrested Indians fishing in federally sanctioned "usual and accustomed grounds and stations." Even after a federal appeals court upheld their rights, state authorities continued such arrests.[22] In late 1963 and early 1964, the state closed the entire Green River and part of the Nisqually River from Indian net fishing – prompting local Indian activists including Janet and Don McCloud, Billy Frank Jr., and Al Bridges to form the Survival of American Indians Association (SAIA). The state of Washington had decreed that the steelhead trout "is a white man's fish," joked Janet McCloud. "They must think that the steelhead swam over behind the *Mayflower*."[23] One of their first acts was to contact Jack Tanner, a lawyer from the NAACP's Northwest Area.[24]

The fish-ins, as the media dubbed them, paralleled that of African American civil rights activities in striking ways. While local activists prepared to challenge the state legally, they also sought to dramatize their plight and perhaps force federal authorities to intervene on their behalf. This effort was enhanced greatly when a newly emboldened NIYC entered the scene with Marlon Brando, Episcopalian minister John Yaryan, and a car full of young, idealistic Indians. Thanks to the celebrity's presence, the media documented Brando's brief attempt at fishing before state game officials apprehended him. Although the prosecutor's

[22] Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 288.

[23] Steiner, *The New Indians*, 55.

[24] American Friends Service Committee, *Uncommon Controversy: Fishing Rights of the Muckelshoot, Puyallup and Nisqually Indians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967; 1970), 108; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 59; and Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism," 121-124.

office dropped the charges, wishing to avoid making Brando a "martyr," the incident surpassed local organizers' expectations.[25] Although SAIA activists welcomed the attention and accepted Brando's (and later Dick Gregory's) sincerity in assisting, they were deeply skeptical of NIYC intentions. "Brando was sincere, but was with the wrong group," stated *Survival News*, SAIA's occasionally published newsletter. "All too often those who come to help are diverted by the publicity seekers," referring to NIYC.[26] Janet McCloud, the newsletter's editor, registered similar complaints after black comedian Dick Gregory in 1966 came to highlight the fishing rights struggle and ended up garnering much of the publicity himself. Although activists found Gregory to be well-intentioned in his two-year legal struggle after an arrest, they were skeptical of actions by lawyer Jack Tanner and others that stressed Gregory's civil rights and overshadowed the Indian cause. This distraction also made it more difficult for the tribes' "so-called renegades" to persuade tribal councils to supplement court action with the fish-ins. "He is trying to turn this into a civil rights issue," stated Nisqually Tribal Chairman Elmer Kalama. "We are fighting for our fishing rights, and he is hurting our cause."[27]

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25 *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1964.

26 *Survival News*, November 1966, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT.

27 Quote in *Seattle Times*, February 17, 1966. Also *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1964; *Survival News*, [October?] 1966, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT; Hank Adams, interview notes by Oliver Stone, n.d. [1966], Pacific Northwest Regional Office box, "Indian Program – Fishing Rights Controversy, 1966" folder, AFSC; Smith, "Indians, Counter Culture and the New Left," in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 149-151; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 46. For more on fishing rights, see Wilkinson, *Messages from Frank's Landing*; and Deloria, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest: From the Coming of the White Man to the Present Day* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

Hank Adams, a new member of NIYC in late 1963, was one of the college-educated youth that local fishing rights activists initially believed to be insincere. Although such feelings never went away completely, Adams proved to be in the fight for the duration, taking him to the Poor People's Campaign in Washington among other places. Called "the most important Indian" by Vine Deloria, Adams was "the key man behind the scenes, the crucial individual who held the line through knowledge, perseverance, and hard work during those times when others shirked the dirty work or failed to see … the crucial nature of the confrontation."[28] Born in Fort Peck, Montana, and raised in Washington state after his mother married a Quinault, Adams became politically active as a fourteen-year-old in response to state assumption of jurisdiction over their reservation. The takeover proved destructive as it lifted tribal alcohol bans and empowered a hostile white police force on the reservation, prompting Quinaults, including Adams, to hold press conferences and lobby the government to reverse the statute. During the next five years, tribal council leaders noticed Adams' work and began to groom him for leadership. Yet, like his NIYC counterparts, he became increasingly disillusioned with tribal leadership. When Clyde Warrior began to push NIYC toward direct action, it piqued Adams' interest.[29]

During the first fish-ins, Adams was an influential force – but, like Bob Moses or Ella Baker of SNCC, characteristically behind the scenes. Shirley Hill Witt described him later as "a thinker [but] not particularly charismatic."[30] For instance, while Clyde Warrior

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28 *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975.

29 *Smith and Warrior*, 44-45.

30 Shirley Hill Witt fax to Chris Harrison, January 11, 2000, Box 1, Folder 15, NIYC.

and Mel Thom receive considerable attention in Stan Steiner's early account of the fish-ins and the larger Indian youth movement – folks in "spectacular dress and rhetoric of the militant" – Adams blends into the background.[31] Yet it was Adams who handled much of the planning. In April 1964, Adams organized a rally of 2,000 at the Washington state capitol in protest of authorities' treatment of fishermen's rights – a protest that Jack Tanner of the NAACP called "ridiculous."[32] Adams wrote press releases and persuaded Charles Kuralt of CBS News to cover the issue. He prompted a number of documentaries and convinced the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to study the fishing rights issue, eventually leading to AFSC's 1966 report *Uncommon Controversy*. And, with only a little more than a year of undergraduate education, Adams became one of the most well-versed experts on Indian treaty law, according to law school-trained men such as the University of Washington's Ralph Johnson. Yet he insisted that those fishermen who sacrificed themselves win the public's accolades. "You have stood alone against the most formidable odds facing Indian people anywhere today," Adams told the fishermen before a meeting. "There are those who say that your demonstrations and direct action are 'wrong.' There are those who say you are nothing but a group of rebels and renegades. On the contrary. It is wrong to surrender our rights in silence."[33] Adams remained a tireless fighter for fishing rights for years, leaving NIYC in 1966 after the organization had strayed from direct action protest. He kept in touch, however, with Clyde Warrior and Mel Thom. Two years later, he

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[31] *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975.

[32] *National Observer*, March 9, 1964, Box 19, Folder 4, NIYC.

[33] Steiner, *The New Indians*, 59.

reunited with them on the eve of the Poor People's Campaign before he became the Indian contingent's lead spokesman in Washington.[34]

Another strain of protest that grew in popularity among Indians during the so-called Red Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was that of occupation, reflecting the centrality of land, space, and sovereignty both practically and spiritually to native communities. But these did not start with the much-publicized occupations of Alcatraz Island, the BIA headquarters in Washington, and Wounded Knee between 1969 and 1973. Members of the Six Nations, Miccosukee, and Pit River all had squatted during their protests. In 1961, activists in the United Native Americans at the University of California, Berkeley, commandeered an unused bungalow to develop a native cultural center. In 1964, five Sioux regulars at the Bay Area Indian Center chartered a boat to Alcatraz, where the government recently had closed the island prison, to announce their claim of the surplus federal property and to offer to take it off the government's hands. Although prepared to stay a while, they left a few hours later on the advice of their lawyer and at the urgent behest of the island's caretaker. But the idea of regaining lost land, ancestral or just symbolic, remained a powerful one – and a factor for at least some of those Indians who chose to go to Washington in the spring of 1968.[35]

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[34] Steiner, *The New Indians*, 57-64; *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975; Wilkinson, *Messages from Frank's Landing*, 44-46; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 59.

[35] Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 16-18, 31, 38.

While the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had little idea on what terms Indians might participate in the campaign, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) did. SCLC's earliest partner in sponsoring the PPC, AFSC had a twenty-year relationship with American Indian activists in the Pacific Northwest fighting relocation and termination and became the first prominent non-Indian organization to support the treaty rights fight. Starting in 1965, AFSC staff and volunteers began to compile material on the fishing rights struggle to help inform the organization's stance, resulting in *Uncommon Controversy*, which was initially published by the National Congress of American Indians and then re-published by an academic press. Although the editors ensured readers that the book did "not speak for any of the Indians, Indian groups, public agencies or private agencies or groups" involved in the fishing rights struggle, the report did help legitimate the fight in white liberal peace and civil rights circles. AFSC's connections to Indian activists, including Hank Adams, would prove invaluable when King and SCLC came calling.[36]

Initially, however, Tillie Walker became SCLC's conduit to the unknown world of Indian activism and epitomized the enthusiasm some Indians had for King's crusade. Walker, a Mandan from Fort Berthold, North Dakota, was director of the Denver-based United Scholarship Service (USS), a private non-profit foundation that helped guide Indian and ethnic Mexican students into exclusive secondary schools, colleges, and summer internships. Originally founded in 1960 to give small scholarships to Indian and Mexican college students, Vine Deloria Jr. (a prep school graduate himself), Walker, and others had

[36] "Resumé of Pacific Northwest Regional Indian Program for Fundraising Purposes," in Pacific Northwest Regional Office box, "Indian Program – General" folder, AFSC; *Uncommon Controversy*, vii-xi; and Wilkinson, *Messages from Frank's Landing*, 46.

transformed the group into the largest organization of its kind serving those minority communities. As USS director, Walker had developed relationships with many social justice organizations, including AFSC. She was considered "a sort of big sister" to the NIYC and has been credited for imploring Clyde Warrior to enter alcohol rehab. When SCLC's Bernard Lafayette and Tom Houck requested help as they desperately recruited in the winter of 1968, her name joined thousands of other on lists of potential participants. Unlike many others, however, she responded affirmatively, even enthusiastically. "Tillie would call me everyday to find out what I was doing," Houck said, "and she worked in the Indian contacts a lot."[37] According to Walker, she saw in the poverty of Mississippi her home reservation: "I saw that if you are poor in Mississippi and you are poor in North Dakota, it's all the same thing. You're fighting the same battle."[38] After finding out that other Indian activists she knew did not plan to attend King's Minority Group Conference, she went to Atlanta herself – even though she did not consider herself "an Indian leader." Joining her there were NIYC veterans Hank Adams and Mel Thom, Rose Crow Flies High of North Dakota's Three Affiliated Tribes, the Sioux Council's Ray Berry, Cecil Corbett of Arizona's Indian Ministries, Thadis Oxendine of the Lumbee Indian Citizens Council in North Carolina, and several members of the eastern band of the Cherokees.[39]

[37] Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon.

[38] Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

[39] Tom Houck and Tillie Walker, interviews by Kay Shannon; "American Indians, Poor Whites, Spanish-Americans Join Poor People's Washington Campaign," SCLC release, March 15, 1968, Poor People's Campaign folder, Box 2101, NWRO; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 46-47, 56, 90-91. In the last installment of his King trilogy, Taylor Branch also places American Indian Movement (AIM) co-founder Dennis Banks in Atlanta, but according to Banks' own autobiography,

While those Indians who attended saw great potential in the campaign as King described it, they also brought genuine concerns to the table. After receiving a primer on Indian issues, the SCLC leader offered considerable support for their unique agenda of strengthened treaty rights and self-determination, blended with more routine urban needs. Reies Tijerina's prominent voice, despite monopolizing the meeting at times, also reassured Indians that treaty interests would not be forgotten. Yet, many Indian activists still worried that the campaign would prove to be nothing more than "a NEGRO movement," as Walker and Adams reiterated a week later.[40] Adams even believed that SCLC may have "made a mistake" by inviting Indian leaders because the government easily could respond with more funding for tribal governments, creating 6,000 more bureaucrats and considerable native opposition to the campaign. In some ways, he was correct. At first, Walker's tribal council at Fort Berthold had wholeheartedly endorsed the campaign. It "started off so great because they passed a resolution that they would back (the campaign)," she stated, and then they spread the word by having "community meetings all over."[41] Walker believed that this was essential to persuading a sizable number of the reservation's unemployed to go to Washington. But then the superintendent of the local War on Poverty program advised the council to oppose campaign participation. "Indians had too much going for them to join

he was in jail until May 1968. SCLC records also do not mention Banks' presence. See Dennis Banks with Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 60-61; and Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 715.

[40] Lares Tresjan and Sandra Green, minutes of Committee of 100 meeting, undated [March 21, 1968?], 1-2, 4, "PPC Steering Committee," Box 2101, NWRO.

[41] Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

any movement like this," Walker said, paraphrasing the superintendent's argument. In other words, tribes could lose benefits such as the expanded funding for Head Start and community action programs proposed by President Johnson in his recent "Forgotten American" address on American Indians.[42] "And so the tribal council turned around and started fighting this whole thing and that made me more determined that a government agency wasn't going to stop me."[43]

During the next month and a half, Walker succeeded in building a viable Indian contingent for the campaign, one that had the potential to strengthen pan-Indian ties. Some had been on board from the beginning, agreeing with Walker that the campaign offered a rare opportunity to seek governmental redress. Others, such as Vic Charlo, had epiphanies after King's death, not unlike many other black, white, and Mexican participants initially skeptical of the campaign. Charlo, a great-grandson of Salish Chief Charlo from the Bitterroot Valley in Montana, recalled responding to King's death as, "I gotta' do something, and I didn't know what. Then this came up." Charlo had been working as a trainer at the University of Utah for the Office of Economic Opportunity and "did not consider myself a

[42] Lyndon Johnson, "The Forgotten American," March 6, 1968, Box 74, "The American Indian" folder, LBJ Aides – Joseph Califano, Special Assistant to the President, LBJ. In the address, the president embraced "a goal that ends the old debate about 'termination' of Indian programs and stresses self-determination; a goal that erases old attitudes of paternalism and promotes partnership and self-help." He proposed millions of dollars more for Indian schools, community centers, college scholarships, health care aides, vocational training, and reservation infrastructure. The administration's timing for a new Indian policy proved fortuitous, but I have found little evidence to suggest a deliberate attempt to blunt Indian participation in the campaign.

[43] Quote by Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon. Also, Eleanor Eaton memo to Moffett, April 2, 1968, CRD Administration Folder 32556, "Minority Leaders Conference Washington's Poor People's Campaign," AFSC.

liberal." But when Walker called, he responded enthusiastically – a decision that he says changed his career path for good.[44]

By the end of April, Indians had substantial representation in the campaign's vanguard action, the Committee of 100, and its public demands. Joining Walker in Washington were Indians from across the country, including those from the Atlanta conference and others such as Teresa Bridges and Edith McCloud from the Survival of American Indians Association in Washington state, Leo LeClair and Robert Dumont of the NIYC, and Martha Grass and Andrew Dreadfulwater, War on Poverty activists from Oklahoma. In Washington, as part of the campaign's opening salvo, Mel Thom and Ralph Abernathy unveiled an initial list of Indian-specific demands to Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Robert Bennett. Declaring that "the Indian system is sick, paternalism is the virus, and the Secretary of the Interior is the carrier," Mel Thom laid out a series of policy proposals, nearly all of which called for greater autonomy within the reservation system.[45] Indians did not want a return to the devastating policy of "termination," in which the government dropped all financial support, but one that allowed tribes to choose their own superintendents and their own school principals and

[44] Victor Charlo, interview by author, February 22, 2007, by telephone. Chief Charlo won notoriety in the late nineteenth century for leading a twenty-year resistance movement against federal efforts to move the Salish from the Bitterroot Valley to the Flathead reservation in what was then the Montana Territory. Victor Charlo's brother, Louis, was one of the original flag-raisers at the World War II battle of Iwo Jima. In perhaps the most well-recorded flag-raising in history, Ira Hayes, a Pima, and five others replaced that original flag with a much larger one. *Weekly Missoulian* (Missoula, Montana Territory), April 26, 1876; and *Missoulian*, October 21, 2006.

[45] "Statements of Demands for Rights of the Poor Presented to Agencies of the U.S. Government by the Poor People's Campaign and Its Committee of 100," 45, April 29-30, 1968, Box 177, Folder 24, SCLC.

administrators, permitted them to tax railroads for using their land, and recognized the advantages of bi-cultural education and an expansion of local control. Calling gradual measures to include tribes in some decision-making "tokenism," Thom stated further that, "we make it unequivocally clear that Indian people have the right to *separate and equal* communities within the American system; our own communities that are institutionally and politically separate and socially equal and secure within the American system" (emphasis added).[46]

Interestingly, Thom's statement made no mention of the recently passed and controversial Indian Civil Rights Act (ICRA) of 1968, part of the larger civil rights bill banning racial discrimination in housing. Two weeks earlier, President Johnson had signed the bill into law, calling it one of the "promises of a century. … With this bill, the voice of justice speaks again. It proclaims that fair housing for all … is now the American way of life."[47] Because King's death had made it politically possible, fair housing legislation proved a bittersweet victory for the liberals and civil rights activists who had long sought it. But while most blacks and some whites embraced a frontal assault on residential segregation as a positive reform, tribal activists viewed the act's Indian provisions with some uncertainty. In what U.S. Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina had intended as a "poison pill" to derail civil rights legislation, late additions to the act included language bringing the country's approximately 550 Indian nations under the full force of the Bill of Rights, specifically formalizing the tribal courts into entities more in line with the federal judiciary. Ervin's

[46] "Statements of Demands," 45-49.

[47] *New York Times*, April 12, 1968.

attempt to pit black versus Indian backfired when Congressman Ben Raifel, a Sioux and conservative Republican from South Dakota, supported the legislation. For those Indians interested in greater individual protections under U.S. law, including religious freedom, the act was a triumph. But other activists saw the bill as introducing a dangerous federal intrusion on tribal sovereignty that, in the words of Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford Lytle, "greatly complicated the lives of Indians. ... The informality of Indian life that had been the repository of cultural traditions and customs was suddenly abolished, and in its place came the rigid requirements ... The ICRA basically distorted reservation life.[48] Yet, ICRA's influence, good or bad, did not surface in campaign rhetoric. Most likely, this omission reflected SCLC's continued murky understanding of Indian issues. From SCLC's perspective, how could such a civil rights bill be anything other than triumphant?[49]

The actions of the Committee of 100 received generally positive media reports, although Indian participation was all but ignored – even by Marxist newspapers such as the *Worker*. Yet, this did not seem to slow recruitment efforts by Tillie Walker, Hank Adams, and others. Indeed, a couple of hundred Indians in all, from more than a dozen tribes mostly in the West, committed themselves to the long trek to Washington. Walker had persuaded other established Indian leaders to join the effort, including eastern tribes' Mad Bear Anderson of the Iroquois Confederacy and Chief Francis, a Passamaquoddy from

[48] Deloria and Lytle, *The Nations Within*, 211, 213.

[49] Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 (25 U.S.C. 1301-03), www.tribal-institute.org/lists/icra1968.htm, accessed June 10, 2007; *New York Times*, April 12, 1968; Deloria and Lytle, *The Nations Within*, 200-214; and Taiawagi Helton and Lindsay G. Robertson, "The Foundations of Federal Indian Law and Its Application in the Twentieth Century," in *Beyond Red Power*, ed. Cobb and Fowler, 43-44.

Maine who planned to attend "to demand milk for my people."[50] Hank Adams convinced skeptical SAIA members, such as veteran fisherman Al Bridges, to send a contingent to lobby the federal courts directly, in order to "keep fishing and keep living."[51] Even Reies Tijerina, who prided himself on his indigenous roots as a Chicano activist, received commitments to march from Hopi chief Thomas Banyacya in Arizona and Reverend Clifton Hill of the Creek Centralization Committee in Oklahoma. Despite different fundamental solutions to poverty, Indian organizers were able to sell their brethren on a black-led march – a reflection of how the PPC captured the imagination.[52]

While King's assassination changed the heart of some black and ethnic Mexican marchers about participating, his death did not have the same impact on Indians. As a result, a younger group of individuals emerged as representatives of Indian issues in Washington. In addition to the opposition of tribal councils such as Fort Berthold's, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) remained opposed to Indian participation. Repeating their mantra that civil rights-style protests were "not the Indian way," NCAI officials echoed the mainstream media in dismissing the Committee of 100's demands as too vague. Instead, NCAI championed negotiation with a dash of publicity, condemning negative media portrayals of Indians and working with industrialists to improve employment opportunities in the first months of 1968. Although he had left the NCAI leadership a year

[50] *The Worker*, May 19, 1968.

[51] *The Worker*, May 28, 1968.

[52] Steiner, *The New Indians*, 5-6; Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon; Clifton Hill letter to Tijerina, April 21, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT; and Gollin, *The Demography of Protest*, 11-12.

earlier, Vine Deloria Jr. concurred with the organization's stance on the PPC, remaining an observer from afar. Even Clyde Warrior, who had been excited about the campaign, passed – although for very different reasons. But by the spring of 1968, at age 28, his liver was ravaged by years of alcohol abuse. After his mother died, Warrior and his family moved back to Ponca City, Oklahoma, to be near his grandparents, and in the process began drinking again. Just days after Resurrection City fell, Hank Adams, Mel Thom, Vic Charlo, and others gathered in Oklahoma to bury Clyde Warrior and, with him, one of the most influential voices in American Indian activism.[53]

The most dramatic opposition to the PPC, however, came a few weeks into the campaign when Kahn-Tineta Horn confronted Ralph Abernathy at a press conference. While scholars routinely interpret the incident as yet another demonstration of Abernathy's poor leadership, Horn's challenge reflected both SCLC paternalism and legitimate differences in how African Americans and American Indians constructed solutions to their respective poverties. A Mohawk, Canadian, and former model and "Princess Canada," Horn interrupted Abernathy and handed him a letter expressing dismay in the campaign's "exploitation of Indians in your activities." Representing the delegates of the National Aboriginal Traditional Conference, an annual meeting for culturally traditional Indians from North America, Horn was careful to "congratulate you and all of those who have dedicated themselves to this worthy cause." Horn wrote:

[53] Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 56-59; *New York Times*, December 16, 1967, March 22 and May 12, 1968; *The Worker*, May 14, 1968; Cowger, *The National Congress of American Indians*, 155; and Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 129.

> We believe that you may have invited Indians to join you from the generosity of your heart. Unfortunately your goodness and your enthusiasm exceeds your knowledge. You are not aware of the real needs of Indians and surely you do not know of the potential damage that Indians may sustain by merging their claims with those of the Negro problem.[54]

Horn then laid out briefly why African Americans and American Indians had little in common other than poverty, calling it "merely a common agony which is not sufficient to unite Indian, White or Negro society." Not only were they unwilling to abdicate leadership to blacks "or any other race other than Indian," they also rejected "white man's religions and intrusion of Christianity," "the motivations of Negroes and those of Whites ... (including) ambition, effort, discipline, acquisition, possession, competition, and destruction," and the "flagrant publicity seeking militant acts." Therefore, she took offense at both the campaign's style and substance. Buried in Horn's lengthy critique was the sentiment that Indians could not afford to anger the wrong people: "There are those enemies of the Negro people ... who may well become enemies of Indians if the interests of the two groups are not made explicit."[55]

The confrontation surprised Abernathy, who seemed genuinely puzzled by Indian opposition to SCLC's program. He responded that his organization greatly respected Indian issues, as well as Indian independence, but that the campaign's proposed solutions would help everyone. Much later, Abernathy complained bitterly of what he called Indians' "private agenda."[56] His complaints seem unfounded since SCLC officials knew since the

[54] Kahn-Tineta Horn letter to Ralph Abernathy, June 10, 1968, page 1, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

[55] Kahn-Tineta Horn letter to Ralph Abernathy, June 10, 1968, pages 1-4, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

[56] Abernathy, *And the Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 520.

Minority Group Conference that Indian and black policy interests were not identical. But Horn's criticism of the campaign, at least her strong rhetoric against "flagrant publicity seeking militant acts," was exaggerated. During the eighteen months after the Washington confrontation, Kahn-Tineta Horn gained her own notoriety as a "militant." She participated in a variety of high-profile demonstrations, including a blockade of an international bridge between Canada and the United States regarding Indians' refusal to pay customs duties.[57]

On the surface, it seems fitting that those Indians living on reservations – still the majority in the late 1960s – were the most vocal critics of native involvement in the Poor People's Campaign. Indians living on reservations were most cognizant of the differences between their own issues of treaty, land, and fishing rights and those of more urban dwellers, whether they were black, white, or Mexican. As Kahn-Tineta Horn argued in her letter to Abernathy, "The problems of Negroes are living conditions in cities, housing, employment, and quality of opportunity. There is no relationship of the problems of the two groups."[58] NCAI, mostly made up of tribal and former Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, took a similar tack. Yet, for the most part, it was not urban Indians who attended the campaign. Rather, those most identified with the reservations arrived in larger numbers, driven by their disgust with unelected tribal government leadership, which was often rife with corruption, favoritism, and timidity. "We do not understand why Indian tribes cannot select their own Superintendents," Indian campaign leadership wrote Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall.

[57] *Washington Post*, July 13 and December 19, 1968; *Akwesasne Notes*, May and June 1969; *New York Times*, January 16, 1966; and Steiner, *The New Indians*, 229.

[58] Kahn-Tineta Horn letter to Ralph Abernathy, June 10, 1968, pages 1-4, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

"The political structure is systematically controlled by the government and special interest groups who exploit us."[59] But this does not answer why, with the exception of Tillie Walker and Vic Charlo, the growing population of Indians in the cities remained unrepresented at the PPC. Why would they stay away, especially if campaign demands supposedly resonated with urban sensibilities and needs?

The Indian experience in Chicago offers one potential answer. Echoing the concerns of Horn, Deloria, and others, urban Indians avoided close affiliations with African Americans for fear of being overshadowed. Home to a small but growing native community, Chicago witnessed its share of tensions between Indians and other groups, the former often expressing to relocation officials an apprehension with living near blacks. In his study of the "Indian metropolis," for example, James LaGrand attributes such attitudes toward a variety of fears, from their children being picked on and beaten, to the point "that whites might come to view them as just another of the city's minority groups," which meant integration into the majority culture. That was unacceptable because, quoting one Winnebago-Sioux, the "Negro's culture … is obtained from the white man."[60] Of course, this view ignored not just the fluidity of culture but also many tribal members' patterns of intermarrying with African Americans, as had been the case with Cherokees. Yet, such attitudes persisted and contributed to Indian concentration in the city's Uptown area, an enclave of poor migrants, including recent white arrivals from the coal fields of Appalachia.

[59] American Indian Statement by Coalition of American Indian Citizens, n.d., Box 28, Folder 6, NIYC.

[60] LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis*, 120-121.

Despite Uptown's role as a key recruiting space for the PPC through the JOIN Community Union, the area's Indians stayed home. According to Billy Hollins, one of SCLC's lead campaign coordinators in the Midwest, he recruited Indians, but not in Chicago. "I found where Indians were," he said, in small reservations in Michigan and Indiana, as if some did not live in Chicago. Hollins added that it did not help that SCLC's lead voice in Chicago, Jesse Jackson, "had a patented thing he said" while recruiting for the campaign, "so he was just talking about black problems. He didn't really deal with the Indians ... he didn't really talk about that."[61] At least in this case, Indian concerns with being lost in the shuffle seemed well-founded.[62]

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In mid-May, more than one hundred Indians left for Washington, D.C., and began a journey many would never forget. Campaign coordinators dubbed the caravan from the Northwest the "Indian Trail." This caravan started with an estimated eighty people and boasted the most Indian participants, including Hank Adams and his fellow fishing rights activists, Mandans, members of the Three Affiliated Tribes, and others from the Dakotas, Montana, and Minnesota. Hopis joined the Southwest Caravan, as did Mad Bear Anderson, Tillie Walker, and Creeks, Cherokees, and others from Oklahoma. Other caravans also had a smattering of native activists. In all, a conservative estimate from the period had more

[61] Billy Hollins, interview by author.

[62] LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis*, 118-121.

than a dozen tribes from at least eight states represented in the Washington phase of the campaign.[63]

Indians' experiences during the 3,000-mile journey across the country were not fully recorded. While they made up the majority of individuals on the Indian Trail, they remained a small minority in the other caravans. At least on the Southwest Caravan, in which Reies Tijerina and Corky Gonzales took lead roles, Indians maintained a higher profile, although not always in a way to their liking. In both Albuquerque and Denver, Indians prominently shared the stage with Tijerina, Abernathy, and Gonzales, giving speeches and captivating the crowd. In New Mexico, Mad Bear Anderson and a 120-year-old Hopi named Katchongva greeted onlookers, while Mandans Bert Yellow Wolf (Chief Jichk), Donald Malnourie, and Ted.Baker helped kick off a Denver rally with Indian folk songs. "Nobody knows what poor is like the Indians," declared Fred Carr, a Crow from Montana. "Nobody has seen horses starving and dead in their own land. The only reason I grew up is because I am mad."[64] When the caravan arrived in St. Louis two days later, Gonzales and members of the Crusade for Justice insisted that other marchers fall in behind the Indians in order to cross the Mississippi River. Arguing that the "first Americans" needed to cross the symbolic gateway to the West (or East, depending on the perspective), Gonzales echoed an earlier call by Tijerina to put Indian interests first. "[I]f Native Americans did not obtain justice,

[63] *People's World*, May 19 and June 15, 1968; *The Worker*, May 12, 1968; Gollin, *Demography of Protest*, 16; and Tom Houck, interview by Kay Shannon. Only the Southern Caravan seemed devoid of Indian participants, perhaps explaining marchers shouting, "There's an Indian there!" after seeing Cherokees in western North Carolina dressed in "greasepaint and long mantles of bright feathers" dancing in front of "phony cement wigwams." *People's World*, May 18, 1968.

[64] *People's World*, June 1, 1968.

nobody could," Tijerina recalled. "If we do not ask for the Native Americans first, then we are not asking for us."[65] Both Chicano leaders were proud of their indigenous heritage – or what Tijerina called his *indohispano* identity – and this sometimes translated into such generous gestures as Indians leading the way into East St. Louis. But this attitude, particularly Tijerina's, also risked replacing the story of imperialism with an arrogant interpretation that Chicanos had Indians' best interests in mind.[66]

When the western contingents arrived in Washington, Indian participants shared ethnic Mexicans' disappointment in the state of Resurrection City and then demonstrated their characteristic independence. Most joined the rest of the Southwest Caravan and stayed in the Hawthorne School, before moving to St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, a block and a half from Hawthorne, and eventually to Resurrection City during the last week. "I really enjoyed" Resurrection City, said Tillie Walker. "We had this area that was quite friendly."[67] She added that, despite the city's media-driven reputation for unrest, they were not touched by conflict there. But the nature of their living arrangements for most of the campaign helped reinforce the Indian participants' close-knit group. Marchers remembered Indians keeping to themselves and rarely consulted with others. After temporarily moving into Hawthorne, "the Indians on their own, just overnight, evaporated," recalled Ernesto Vigil. He remembered Corky Gonzales chuckling about it, saying, "Indians have their own way of

[65] Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger,'* 107.

[66] *People's World*, May 18, 25 and June 1, 1968; *Rocky Mountain News*, May 20, 1968; Ralph Ramirez, interview by author; and Rudy and Gerry Gonzales, interview by author.

[67] Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

doing things and they don't consult with other people who aren't Indians. They know what they're doing and they do things their way."[68] What Gonzales left unsaid was that not only did Indians value their independence, but they had no reason to expect either assistance or understanding from non-Indians who, for generations, ignored native wishes.[69]

Although they indeed were a tighter group than their counterparts, Indians occasionally reached out to others, with mixed success. The protest outside the Supreme Court building became the most prominent Indian-led demonstration of the march, in both participation by other groups and the media attention it attracted. Devised by Hank Adams, the noisy demonstration by hundreds of protesters outside the nation's highest court emerged after several more fishing rights activists were arrested in Washington state. Judging the proposal as an ill-considered gambit that would result in everyone's arrest, Hosea Williams and other aides to Ralph Abernathy initially refused to disturb the SCLC president to propose the idea. A few days earlier, Mad Bear Anderson and a few other Indian leaders threatened to leave the march because they felt "ignored" and "abused" by SCLC leaders. They sought "an apology from SCLC, an extended hand" – a sentiment Tillie Walker confirmed later. "I think the biggest problem (is) that this is a black movement," she said soon after the campaign's Washington phase ended. "And this is the biggest problem that we've faced throughout the whole campaign."[70]

[68] Ernesto Vigil, interview by author.

[69] Frieda Wagner, Pomo, interview by Kay Shannon, July 1968, Washington, D.C., MSRC.

[70] Quote by Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon. Also, Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger,'* 107-112; and *New York Times*, May 26, 1968.

The Indian chiefs received SCLC assurances only after they turned to Tijerina as an ally and go-between – a role he played again on the eve of the protest demonstration. "Request your assistance in bringing full support of SCLC, Resurrection City population, and Black community to this active presentation of issues," wrote Adams in a shorthand note to Tijerina. Adams added that he "would hope for central focus on these Indian issues tomorrow – limiting other PPC activities as much as possible."[71] Eventually, Tijerina persuaded the reluctant Abernathy to sanction the rally, although neither Adams nor Mad Bear Anderson wanted SCLC or the Alianza "leading" the way. Abernathy's concern about arrests was a real possibility, as Adams warned that "most of the Indian group – all of Northwest – prepared to go to jail for sit-in or any such action."[72] Not only was the SCLC leadership wary of mass arrests, Abernathy's experience told him that protesting outside of the court – complete with a slow, mournful banging of drums and the smoking of elaborate pipes – most likely would not produce the desired response from authorities. Besides, it had become clear that Abernathy was most comfortable utilizing the small Indian presence symbolically, and some said rather comically, such as asking a headdress-wearing chief to grant marchers his permission to use the land on the Washington Mall.[73]

Despite the chaos that ensued outside of the Supreme Court building and the thundering condemnations by the mass media, many of its participants believed they had

[71] Hank Adams note to Reies Tijerina, May 28, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT.

[72] Hank Adams note to Reies Tijerina, May 28, 1968, Box 47, Folder 4, RLT.

[73] Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger,'* 107-112; PPC New Mexico delegation press release, May 29, 1968, Box 31, Folder 21, RLT; *New York Times*, May 26, 1968; Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection*, 108; Abernathy, *And the Walls Come Tumbling Down*, 518-521; and *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1968.

sent a constructive message to the court and the public. Reies Tijerina declared the protest a "monumental victory" because the court's chief clerk, John Davis, agreed to speak with a delegation of twenty-one protesters, including seventeen Indians. "Nations that trembled before the United States were perplexed at seeing what these people had done with the judges in the palace of the judicial emperors," Tijerina later wrote.[74] Although this could be dismissed as Tijerina's typical hyperbolic rhetoric, his point was confirmed by others. Court officials said later that it was unprecedented for the court even to accept a petition from a protesting group. And in striking down so-called "man-in-the-house" welfare provisions in *King v. Smith*, the justices seem to comment obliquely on the campaign raging outside. "The causes of and cures for poverty are currently the subject of much debate," wrote Chief Justice Earl Warren.[75]

While the demonstrators believed that they had sent a powerful message to the government, the Supreme Court demonstration and its aftermath once again highlighted how fragile the campaign's interethnic alliances were, as well as the campaign's central paradox: its potential for unity and disunity. Reies Tijerina, who insisted on speaking for Indian interests much of the time, also contributed to this reality. As a self-described *indohispano*, Tijerina not only recognized the indigenous roots of his *mestizaje*, but also the commonalities between the treaty rights fight of many Indians and his own struggle for land

[74] Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger,'* 112.

[75] Quote in King v. Smith, 392 U.S. 309 (1968). Also Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger,'* 112; and *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, May 30, 1968.

grants in the Southwest.[76] Both recognized the power of the judiciary in sustaining what they deemed unfair treatment as well as resolving those problems. Although he never formally received a law degree, Hank Adams by the late 1960s had taught himself Indian treaty law, which he put to good use in helping win greater recognition of Northwest Indians' fishing rights. For the most part, Tijerina left the legal expertise to others, but understood that his political efforts worked in tandem with the legal challenges upon which judges sooner or later ruled – including those land grant lawsuits that continue today. Tijerina had developed a good relationship with Thomas Banyacya, a Hopi spiritual leader from Arizona, which had tied Tijerina into a larger network of traditional native leadership. Thus, Tijerina had some credibility when he spoke to the press and SCLC leadership about Indian concern – from the Minority Group Conference in March to his role mediating the Supreme Court protest and Mad Bear Anderson's near departure.[77]

Yet, Tijerina's insistence on speaking *for* Indians – as if his interests were identical to theirs – was more than a bit irritating to some Indian activists. It also echoed some of the sexism that Chicana activists encountered in their dealings with Tijerina. For instance, Tillie Walker recalled a moment when the Indian contingent chose Martha Grass, a poor mother of eleven from Oklahoma, as a spokeswoman. Tijerina argued that Grass did not speak for Indians and suggested someone else,

[76] In both contemporary speeches and his autobiography, Tijerina used the term "indohispano" to acknowledge the indigenous as well as Hispanic aspects of his *mestizaje* identity. See Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger,'* xv.

[77] *New York Times*, May 26, 1968; FBI field report, Albuquerque, December 27, 1967, Box 2, Folder 23, RLT; Tijerina, *They Called Me 'King Tiger,'* 171; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 122-123; and *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975.

> [A]nd I just laughed. ... I just told them you have no business trying to choose our leaders. We know who we want to follow and I think our group is small enough so we know who is who within it. And we knew who we wanted in it and we knew we wanted Martha Grass to speak … as a person who comes from a community where there was a lot of discrimination against Indian people and as a person who did a beautiful job of speaking.[78]

Tijerina accused Walker of being middle class and thus somehow illegitimate. Granted, Walker's United Scholarship Service served Indians seeking middle class credentials more than anyone else, but gender also infused this altercation with Tijerina. Nearly half of the Indian contingent were women such as Walker, Rose Crow Flies High, Martha Grass, and Alice Blackhorse, all of whom showed tremendous leadership behind the scenes during the campaign. From Walker's careful financial bookkeeping to the inspiring words of Grass and Blackhorse, native women offered a style quite different from Tijerina's bombast.[79]

During the next several weeks, these women helped lead the Indian delegation in other protests, although no other demonstration captured the public's attention like the breaking of Supreme Court windows. Indeed, one demonstration targeted the National Press Club building over media coverage of the campaign and Indian issues in general. The delegation declared in a press release:

> American Indians have [been] and continue to be exploited by a news service that leans heavily towards sensationalism. The real issues are avoided so that White America does not have to test their consciences. … Instead of reporting to the American Public about the real issues that involves the right of Indian tribes to fish for their basic subsistence, the press headlines about the broken windows. … The windows can be replaced at a small cost in comparison to the human suffering caused by the ruling of the Supreme Court.[80]

[78] Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

[79] Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, interview by author, September 2, 2007, by telephone.

[80] "Statement to National and International Press," June 11, 1968, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

Not surprisingly, only a few press outlets even acknowledged the event and those that did buried the story deep inside another campaign-related report. Even less was made of the delegation's protest against the "merciless slaughter and extermination" of indigenous populations in Brazil, whose military dictatorship was a close U.S. economic and political ally in the Cold War.[81] The brief occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building, repeated two years later on a much larger scale to considerable publicity, received no comment. And Hank Adams continued to spearhead attempts at publicity for those fishing rights activists languishing in legal limbo in the Pacific Northwest. But perhaps it was activists' meeting at the Department of Interior that proved most disconcerting in retrospect. They met with lame-duck Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, who listened for ninety minutes and then apologized for federal paternalism before serving the Indian delegation coffee and cake. Neither the meeting with Udall nor any of the other actions could be called successful in any conventional, policy-oriented way – a point made by Vine Deloria, who called the marchers "sitting ducks for the pros of Interior."[82]

Yet despite their marginalization by the campaign's black leadership and paternalism by some ethnic Mexicans, Indian marchers believed that the overall experience had been worthwhile and important to the welfare of American Indians in general. The campaign

[81] "Statement of Indian People of the Poor People's Campaign," June 1, 1968, Box 32, Folder 2, RLT.

[82] Quote in Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 183. See also *Washington Post*, June 4 and 6, 1968; *People's World*, June 22 and 29, 1968; and Edward C. Johnson, Northern Paiute, in *Indian Self-Rule: Firsthand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan*, ed. Kenneth R. Philp (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986), 188.

offered both the glimpse of interethnic collaboration's potential, while it strengthened the notion that Indians had to band together and be creative in their making a case for Indian activism beyond the staid methods of NCAI and most tribal governments. Acknowledging that they had failed to persuade officials to embrace sympathetic Indian policies proposed in Congress, Hank Adams said that the campaign instead had sparked a "responsible revolution" among U.S. tribes, a foundation on which to build Indian pressure for reform in the next Congress. Part of that process included a newly formed organization called the Coalition of Indian Citizens, as well as participation in the interethnic Poor People's Embassy. Despite great promise, neither organization made much of an institutional impact. Instead, they represented a loose network of Indians and their sympathizers for future action, which at least for Tillie Walker was an important step on its own: "We have never been involved in anything larger than our own groups. In fact ... except for attending Urban Indian Conferences which there are a lot of tribal groups ... this is the first time tribal groups have worked together in this way."[83] Adams, who at 25 years old chalked up the campaign as another chapter in his own political education, tapped this network for a new wave of fish-ins and related protests in Washington state.[84]

Meanwhile, other American Indians emphasized their own personal development. Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, a Lakota from Denver and granddaughter of Alice Blackhorse, called

[83] Tillie Walker, interview by Kay Shannon.

[84] Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 183; *Akwesasne Notes*, January 1975; *Daily World*, October 29, 1968; and Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 98-99.

the campaign a "great opportunity for everybody to pull together."[85] But it also proved transformative for her personally as Indian activists in Denver chose her to speak about the campaign at community events. If anything, she said, the experience forced her to overcome her bashfulness in front of white church crowds. Twenty-five years after the campaign, one scholar suggests that Rose Crow Flies High "embedded the experience of the Poor People's March in her cultural autobiography with as much salience and historical recall" as key historical moments in her own Mandan-Hidatsa tribe.[86] Ironically, it was in Washington, D.C., where she helped hone an alternate model for women's leadership – one which eventually made her the tribe's first chairwoman. And for Victor Charlo, the campaign was "an eye-opener." As a young activist, Charlo had the chance to address the Bureau of Indian Affairs director, sit in jail with NIYC founder Mel Thom, and share stories and observations with folks of other ethnicities. Such conversations offered lessons on how their black or Chicano counterparts looked at the world. One comment that stayed with him forty years later was the observation by one PPC organizer who, commenting on the Washington Monument with its white peak and red lights, said: "Doesn't that look like a Ku Klux Klanner?"[87]

For all of these individuals, a key lesson had been reinforced, if not learned for the first time. Vic Charlo's experience captured it. He initially believed that the answers to his

[85] Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, interview by author.

[86] Tressa Berman, *Circle of Goods: Women, Work, and Welfare in a Reservation Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 83.

[87] Victor Charlo, interview by author.

tribe's troubles, especially its poverty, might be in the nation's capital. But "[i]t wasn't in Washington, D.C.," he stated. "It was in the community, it was with the community. That's what I learned. So instead of working in Washington, D.C., the important place was at home. So that's what I did. I came home and became a teacher."[88] Younger Indians in particular, such as Hank Adams, Tillie Walker, and Jessica Bordeaux-Vigil, left Washington with this clear understanding that broad connections were important but the hardest work had to be conducted at home – that simply asking Congress and federal agencies to show sympathy toward the "forgotten American" was not effective. During the next several years, many other American Indians who did not march followed the lead of Indian campaigners, including activists in Minneapolis, Denver, and other urban locales that transformed American Indian activism into "red power."

* * *

In contrast to American Indians and ethnic Mexicans, whites were quite familiar with the activities of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. From the many social justice activists who marched and protested with King to the liberals who helped underwrite his organization, King and SCLC had created a network of white sympathizers of the freedom struggle. Most of these people, however, were middle class with few direct ties to the constituencies King sought for his new campaign. The challenge to campaign coordinator Bernard Lafayette and "minority group" organizer Tom Houck then was to find genuinely poor white people to attend. That objective, to find the "poorest of the poor," led them to

[88] Victor Charlo, interview by author.

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F 4: Oklahoma Colleges (1968).

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Topics include federal aid to highway projects.

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Topics include public speaking competitions in Oklahoma, 3rd District Oratorical Contest, and the Carl Albert oratorical contest. Correspondents include East Central State College (Ada, Okla.), Eastern Oklahoma State College, Seminole Junior College, and Southeastern State College (Durant, Okla.).

F 24-27: Personal (1968).

Topics include Perrill Munch Brown, Oral Roberts, Eagle Picher Smelting Plant, and the Democratic National Congressional Committee. Correspondents include Wilburn Cartwright, Reva Beck Bosone, Frank William Boykin, Marcus Cohn, Glenn English, Julian J. Rothbaum, Lawrence F. O'Brien, Ramsey Clark, Margaret Lokey, E. K. Gaylord, William J. Holloway, and Frank Rogers.

F 28: Photographs (1968).

F 29: Politics (1968).

Topics include George C. Wallace, John W. McCormack, and electioneering.

F 30: Poor People's Campaign (1968).

Correspondents include James F. Hamilton and Ralph D. Abernathy.

F 31: Powell, Adam C. (1968).

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