

Quotations from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the final years of his life Rev. Dr. King came to understand the interrelatedness of militarism, racism, and poverty, calling the movement to turn its fight towards the realization of human rights. At the time of his death Rev. Dr. King and leaders from around the country were organizing the Poor People's Campaign, an effort to unite the poor across color lines. Leaders from diverse struggles across the country are coming together to reignite this unfinished business and build a poor people's campaign for today. Below are excerpts from King's strategic vision for this movement from which we have drawn.

1. "We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights,... an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society... We have been in a reform movement... (But) after Selma and the voting rights bill, we moved into a new era, which must be the era of revolution... We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power... This means a revolution of values and other things... We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together. And you really can't get rid of one without getting rid of the others... The whole structure of American life must be changed... America is a hypocritical nation and (we) must put (our) own house in order."

— "Speech at Staff Retreat" (Frogmore, May 1967)

2. "The dispossessed of this nation - the poor, both white and Negro - live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man who has nothing to lose. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life. Beginning in the New Year, we will be recruiting three thousand of the poorest citizens from ten different urban and rural areas to initiate and lead a sustained, massive, direct action movement in Washington. Those who choose to join this initial three thousand, this non-violent army, this 'freedom church' of the poor, will work with us for three months to develop non-violent action skills."

— "Nonviolence and Social Change" (December 1967)

3. "We are assembled here together today with common problems, bringing together ethnic groups that maybe have not been together in this type of meeting in the past. I know I haven't been in a meeting like this. And it has been one of my dreams that we would come together and realize our common problems. Power for poor people will really mean having the ability, the togetherness, the assertiveness, and the aggressiveness to make the power structure of this nation say yes when they may be desirous to say no."

— Poor People's Campaign steering committee meeting (March 1968)

4. "We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. 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, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered... True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice, which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth...A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

— "Beyond Vietnam" (Riverside Church, April 1967)

5. "We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together. And you can't get rid of one without getting rid of the other. Jesus confronted this problem of the inter-relatedness of evil one day...A big-shot came to him and he asked Jesus a question, what shall I do to be saved? Jesus

didn't get bogged down in a specific evil. He looked at Nicodemus, and he didn't say now Nicodemus you must not drink liquor. He didn't say Nicodemus you must not commit adultery. He didn't say Nicodemus you must not lie. He didn't say Nicodemus you must not steal. He said, Nicodemus you must be born again. In other words Nicodemus, the whole structure of your life must be changed...Now this is what we are dealing with in America. Somebody must say to America, America if you have contempt for life, if you exploit human beings by seeing them as less than human, if you will treat human beings as a means to an end, you thingify those human beings. And if you will thingify persons, you will exploit them economically. And if you will exploit persons economically, you will abuse your military power to protect your economic investments and your economic exploitations. So what America must be told today is that she must be born again. The whole structure of American life must be changed.”
—“Speech at Staff Retreat” (Frogmore, May 1967)

6. “The movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. 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. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice, which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the oil?’ You begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the iron ore?’ You begin to ask the question, ‘Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that’s two-thirds water?’ These are the words that must be said.”
— “Where Do We Go from Here?” (SCLC Convention, August 1967)

7. “You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that’s the beginning of getting out of slavery.” —“I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” (Memphis, April 3, 1968)

8. “History has...taught... it is not enough for people to be angry—the supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force.” —“Honoring Dr. Du Bois” (Freedomways 8:2, 1968)

9. “By the thousands we will move. Many will wonder where we are coming from. Our only answer will be that we are coming up out of great trials and tribulation. Some of us will come from Mississippi, some of us will come from Cleveland. But we will all be coming from the same conditions. We will be seeking a city whose Builder and Maker is God and if we will do this we will be able to turn this nation upside down and right side up. We may just be able to speed up the day when man everywhere will respect the dignity and worth of human personality and all will cry out that we are children of God.”
—“Why We Must Go to Washington” (SCLC Staff Retreat, January 1968)

10. “God has left enough and to spare in this world for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and God never intended for some of his children to live in inordinate superfluous wealth while others live in abject, deadening poverty. And somehow I believe that God made it all...I believe firmly that the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. I don’t think it belongs to Mr. Rockefeller. I don’t think it belongs to Mr. Ford. I think the earth is the Lord’s, and since we didn’t make these things by ourselves, we must share them with each other. And I think this is the only way we are going to solve the basic problems and the restructuring of our society which I think is so desperately needed.”
—“Dr. King’s Speech” (Frogmore, November, 1966)

11. “When a people are mired in oppression, they realize deliverance when they have accumulated the power to enforce change...The call to prepare programs distracts us excessively from our basic and primary task...We are, in fact, being counseled to put the cart before the horse. Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands.”
— *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1967)