

DRAFT

# Resource-less but Resourceful

## Building a New Network of "Underground Railroad" Projects of Survival

By *Willie Baptist*

**"As the saying goes, 'the rich get richer and the poor write grant proposals.' Strategically, the rich is not going to fund or provide resources for anything that is independent of and counter to their political program or leadership..."<sup>1</sup>**

**"...The basic strategic question, including the question of resources, is therefore: Which side will the increasingly economically insecure masses of the so-called American "middle class" be won over to? Will they continue to adapt to the programs of the rich and see the country continue to move in the direction of more impoverishment and human misery? Or will they adopt the program of the poor and move this country in the direction of ending poverty?"<sup>2</sup>**

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended to serve as a basis of discussion and debate on how the resource-less sections of a class society have no choice but to resort to their own resourcefulness to eke out a bare existence or "to make ends meet." With inadequate to no income the poor and dispossessed (property-less in the means of production and exchange) are preoccupied with a never-ending hunt for their basic and immediate necessities of life. This impoverished condition also reduces them to constant personal stress and crises with little or no cultural outlets for regular relief and recreation. They are ultimately compelled to creatively adopt and adapt collective forms of survival and struggle whether legal or illegal. During capitalist economic downturns they are, in larger numbers and in prolonged efforts, forced into social theft or wholesale, clandestine violations of bourgeois property laws. For instance, shoplifting and the nonpayment of consumer debt and housing payments (rental or mortgage) is rising in the United States. Therefore everywhere and every time the poor and dispossessed have arisen in resistance they ultimately came up against the various legal agencies of organized state force and violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Citation

<sup>2</sup> Citation

These desperate tactics are much like those of the runaway slaves during American slavery engaged in protracted and mass operations of illegal theft stealing themselves away as the private property of capitalist slaveholders. What begun as desperate sporadic and individual acts of rebellion grew into the well-organized operations of the Underground Railroad that eventually threw the entire country into massive ideological, military, and political revolutionary turmoil.

The mass illegal operations of the runaway slaves along with the political assistance of abolitionist societies formed into a sophisticated and elaborate system of the famous Underground Railroad. This system included a whole creative network of survival projects to meet the immediate needs of the runaway slaves. These projects help sustained the mass “thief” operations, which eventually ignited the entire the country into a major civil war and social reconstruction. This period of mass social upheaval and transformation ideologically redefined and shaped the basic American personality (or mental terrain) in both good and bad ways. Presently, the poor and especially the homeless occupy a similar position as the American black slaves. Their sustained and uninterrupted social resistance presents possibly the same tremendous ideological and political impact. In other words, their movement and organization threatens to destroy the major stereotypes and misperceptions that have upheld the legitimacy and false morality of the capitalist economic status quo for centuries.

A serious study of the political role the network of abolitionists played as advanced conscious strategists and revolutionary cadre in the mass movement to abolish slavery must be done. It is indispensable to any political education and mass organizing drive of the poor today. The abolitionists’ agitational and educational work explained and ensured the connection of the immediate fights and maneuvers of the Underground Railroad to the overall struggle to defeat the Slave Power and eliminate slavery. The indispensable and intelligent roles of the abolitionists the likes of Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglas provide many lessons as to needed qualities of leadership. These lessons must not be lost on the political thinking and revolutionary development of the newly emerging leaders of the struggles of the poor and dispossessed today. The dedication, daring, clarity and creativity they showed enhanced and contributed to the overall resourcefulness of the runaway slaves, the vigilante defense committees of freed slaves, and the armed slave units of the civil war.

The role played by the abolitionists confirmed the supreme lesson of successful social movements and revolutions in the world history; that the first and absolutely necessary step in a mass organizing drive to unite as a class the dispossessed and oppressed is to ‘organize the organizers,’ to form a leading revolutionary and strategic thinking cadre core. This step is the decisive step especially when organizing the poor and homeless.

*“You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, 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.” - Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” (1968)*

This paramount lesson from world history is not lost today on the capitalists as the ruling class, the so-called “Powers That Be,” or “Wall Street”. Therefore, it is no accident that today the poor and dispossessed remain the most disunited, most racially segregated, and most disorganized section of the population in society. The well-paid political strategists and ideologists of Wall Street have long kept the impoverished divided through their control of all the major legal, political, religious, educational and artistic institutions. The origins of this formula of political control and strategy of the United States’ ruling class go back to the early days of its birth. Ever since the days of land expropriations from the Native American Indians and of the enslavement of black Africans the ruling class has utilized their control of such institutions to create and uphold the long *dejure* and *defacto* segregated communities, churches, and schools. This disunity reinforced throughout history has therefore become the very pivot of the political strategy of Wall Street, whose domestic and foreign policies are predicated on what Dr. King described as the “cruel manipulation of the poor” against each other including having the poor go out to foreign lands to fight and kill other poor folks. This has been an endless history of the “poor fighting the rich man’s wars.”

To counter this political strategy today and to abolish the capitalist profit making and poverty-producing system that it protects, we can learn much from the period of mass anti-slavery agitation, the US civil war and reconstruction. Just as the black slaves’ sustained and united actions exerted a tremendous ideologically and politically destructive impact on legal slavery, successfully uniting the poor and dispossessed as the leading organized force then, so can the sustained and united actions of the poor and dispossessed today have a similar impact on legal poverty. Just as in the successfully sustained anti-slavery movement, a mass organizing drive to unite the poor and dispossessed is going to require a similar extended and elaborate ‘Underground Railroad’ of creative, defensive, and cooperative ‘projects of survival.’ And like the Underground Railroad, these survival projects cannot be reduced to disempowering charity projects. They must not be set up as an end in themselves, as small cooperative societies paralleled to a remaining mass murdering capitalistic economic system. They must serve tactically to at least partially address the immediate material, spiritual, and intellectual needs of struggle to advance the mass organizing drive to unite the impoverished. They have to be means and measures of self-defense to sustain the building of a broad social movement to be transformed into an overall offensive to abolish poverty all together.

In this regards we can also learn a lot from the 1960s-70s Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which was a politically oriented organization of mainly poor and ghettoized blacks, wherein lies many historical examples of effective projects of survival. The Black Panthers provided a number of them, particularly its Free Breakfast Program for School Children, which was later copied by various state legislatures and elementary schools. These projects endeared the Panthers with needy families and garnered much support and respect among the public at large. This occurred despite a major media blackout and false narrative promoted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and its Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Indeed, when most Americans think of the Black Panther Party, they imagine a black gun-toting radical group out to kill white people. This was the false image created and promoted by the media and part of a misinformation campaign that condemned the Panthers' projects of survival as "dangerous nefarious" activities, leading to their complete breakup by local FBI agents.

As the founder and leader of the Black Panther Party, Dr. Huey P. Newton, writes about their survival programs in his doctoral thesis turned book, *WAR AGAINST THE PANTHERS* (1996),

*"What never became clear to the public, largely because it was de-emphasized in the media... The Party has always urged self-defense against poor medical care, unemployment, slum housing, under-representation in the political process, and other social ills that poor and oppressed people suffer. The Panther means for implementing its concept of self-defense was its various survival programs, symbolized best by the police patrols and the free breakfast program for school children. In addition to these programs, however, the Party early initiated health clinics providing free medical and dental service, a busing program to take relatives of prisoners on visiting days, and an escort and transportation service for residents of senior citizen housing projects, as well as a clothing and shoe program to provide for more of the needs of the local community. It was these broad-based programs, including the free food programs where thousands of bags of groceries were given away to the poor citizens of the community, that gave the Party great appeal..."<sup>3</sup>*

In class-based societies such as the present capitalist society, political power is the central arbiter and manager of all major social relations and institutions. By

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<sup>3</sup> Include citation from *War Against the Panthers*. It should be noted that although the Panthers could not match the scale and scope of major media, they were able to somewhat counter the "perception management" campaigns directed against them with their own independent media. Their regularly and widely distributed newspaper, *THE BLACK PANTHER*, was highly regarded and had global reach, aiding mass recruitment and worldwide support. This greatly helped them to effectively popularize long-lasting counter slogans and symbols.

definition the ruling capitalist class is the present holder of this power. Political power revolves around the question of resources – who has them and who doesn't. In history the dispossessed, the have-nots or the property-less, constitute the class of the resource-less. However, they have exhibited tremendous creativity and resourcefulness as manifested in their continuous resilience and resistance. Due to their subjugation to the ruling class, the source of their resourcefulness is not money that would give them any mastery of the economy. Nor is it the might of the organized units of force and violence, such as the police, ICE, intelligence and the military. The growing numbers of the poor and dispossessed masses dwarf the tiny numbers of the rich rulers. The source of the resourcefulness and power of the poor consist in the unity and organization of their numbers led by knowledge.

In fact, this prospect compels the resource-less to understand the central problem of power resources and the sources of their resourcefulness in the 3 main following types of resources: (1) people and their conscious development, (2) money, and (3) in-kind resources, which include the development of Underground Railroad-like projects of survival. While money remains a necessity, it is also deeply ideological. People put their money into what they believe in or, as the saying goes, “where your mouth is.” Only people create the in-kind resources of cooperative survival projects. People, including leading cadre, are therefore, the most important resource of broad mass movement to abolish poverty.

The present economic conditions are continuing to deteriorate for increasing numbers of lower and middle-income families and individuals. Tactically, the development of projects of survival as part of emerging struggles of the poor and homeless has proven to be a way to challenge the entrenched ideology “rugged individualism” and the philosophical influence of American pragmatism. Among other things, these projects can be initial points of protest and unity among the poor in cooperatively and creatively addressing their immediate needs. They are also important ways the potential leaders, teachers, and organizers newly emerging out the ranks of the dispossessed struggles can engage and strengthen their organic connection to the masses and to themselves.

## **2. TWO HOSTILE CAMPS**

We are now entering a new era of revolutionary economic and social transformations. This is due to the unfolding of an unprecedented and comprehensive micro-electronic technological revolution that is colliding with and undermining the globalized capitalistic economic system that produced this revolution. Consequently, the basic problem today is the deepening polarity between wealth and poverty. The basic and defining issue is not one of scarcity, which is constantly and loudly proclaimed when it comes to problems of the poor and dispossessed. It is an inhumane and immoral one of poverty in the midst of plenty, abandonment under conditions of abundance. So in a new era of unheard of wealth, one in every two Americans is now poor or low-income, one in four

children is food insecure in this country, and, as more and more families are forced out of their homes, the average face of a homeless person is a 9 years old white child. This reality is contrary to mainstream corporate media's long propaganda efforts to 'racialize' it, suggesting that poverty is only a problem of nonwhites and one that is not caused by a capitalist poverty-producing system. This economic class inequality is not merely relative, but indicative of a situation where more and more people are fighting every day to make ends meet and more and more people are going to be losing that fight.

Today big capital, which is being compelled competitively to employ the advancing technology, is bringing about a contracting economy. This is resulting in the systemic and chronic crises of stagnating and decreasing wages, and the elimination of living wage jobs and an achievable decent standards of living. Increasing sections of the middle income strata or the so-called "middle class" are being hurled down into poverty, while increasing sections of the poor and dispossessed are being reduced to homelessness and superfluous-ness. That is to say, human beings are increasingly being excluded due to high technology from the capitalist production processes and deemed as no longer needed like industrial human waste. The present shrinkage of the middle-income strata is a major political threat to domestic and global stability. The ancient sage, Aristotle once stated what is still considered a political maxim by powerful representatives of today's ruling class,

*"Where the middle class is large, there are least likely to be factions and dissension."*

This is because the middle strata are the main social bases of existing political power and the apparatuses of State control. It is the 'officer corps' of the organized and powerful agencies of force and violence as well as of the commanding heights of the economy.

Added to this is the current dismantling of the remnants of the national Keynesian Welfare States. These and other circumstances are once again intensifying class antagonisms but this time globally, north and south, in developed and undeveloped countries, are all experiencing an increasing number of failed states. These social developments are indeed newly globalized developments resulting in the globalization of two hostile camps of two antagonistic classes. One camp is that of big capital that is increasingly mobile and global. In the other camp is the newly globalized class of the poor and dispossessed. The conflict between these two camps is defining our times. Diane Bernard, the past President of Michigan Welfare Rights Organization clearly describe the main contending forces of our times,

*The War is on. The war is between two classes, the class of the Haves and the class of the Have-nots... We have been enrolled and in many cases the victims of needs, the victims of wants have been drafted into this war that has been declared on us.*

The deadly consequences of this class conflict on the poor and dispossessed was concisely stated by the former President of the National Union of the Homeless, Leona Smith,

*They're killing us each and every day. We are not dying. They're killing us!"*

Today the poor indeed are being placed in a situation where they have to unite and organize to kill the capitalist system before this system kills them. Under these new most excruciating and explosive conditions, a mass organizing drive to unite the poor as a class is possible and imperative. The arising resistances of property-less masses on the many different fronts and issues of struggle must not be allowed to be maintained by the Powers That Be as separated or isolated efforts. If so, their political strategists will surely continue to maneuver and manipulate us against each other for the political and financial benefit of only Wall Street. This includes diverting and ensuring the disunity of action of poor thereby preventing and preempting their ability to move a middle strata that is becoming increasingly economically insecure and none complacent politically.

*"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. 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..."*

**- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Massey Lecture Series for the Canadian Broadcast Company, December 1967<sup>4</sup>**

Organizing the "bottom", that is to strategically organize the poor and dispossessed as a united class force has never been and is still no an easy endeavor. This is largely because the disunity and disorganization of the "bottom" is the very pivot of the ruling class's political strategy. However, history teaches that to be successful, the initial and inescapable step is to 'organize the organizers.' That is the systematic identification, education, training, and uniting of the newly emerging leaders and teachers out of the struggles of the poor and dispossessed. Organizing these leaders and organizers into a united group ensures the overall political coordination of the different fronts of struggle of the dispossessed masses. This is what, the Italian revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci, meant when he reminded us that,

*"One speaks of generals without an army, but in reality it is easier to form an army than to form generals. So much is this true that an already*

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<sup>4</sup> See also, *Trumpet of Conscience* (1967).

*existing army is destroyed if it loses its generals, while the existence of a united group of generals who agree among themselves and have common aims soon creates an army even where none exists.”*

The rich as the ruling class are, at this time, the most united, organized and powerful force in our society. However, expanding and deepening poverty and inequality is also reaching unprecedented levels, compelling the political strategists of the rich to utilize new versions of old proven tactics as well as come up with new stratagems to cover Wall Street’s increasingly exposed social flank, to cope with the social and political consequences of the increasing economic vulnerability or weaknesses of the global capitalist system. In other words, more and more of the dispossessed or property-less masses are being compelled to question the fundamental of the system. The Powers That Be are therefore compelled to utilize their current control of the economy and the state government agencies to dominate the debate, manipulate the images, define the terms, and finance the strategies related to poverty and the poor in favor of maintaining their power and control.

They shrewdly manage and coordinate this powerful influence by manipulating the different political persuasions arrayed throughout the total spectrum of political thought. This they do with great sophistication and with the help of ‘left progressives’ as well as the ‘center moderates’ and ‘right conservatives.’ Whether it is during a period when the call is to “unite to fight the right” as with the New Deal Coalition, or during a period of Neoliberalism, when the call is to “unite to fight to left, Wall Street’s strategic objective is to maintain their unity and power while the poor remain disunited and turned against each other. In fact, this disunity is directed and funded by the rich to preempt or prevent any united action of the poor that threatens to exert leading political influences on the broader mass of society.

### **3. RESOURCEFULNESS AND THE CHALLENGES OF STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF LEADERSHIP**

Capitalist poverty today presents a complicated and deeply entrenched system domestically and globally. To abolish this system, we must therefore develop an ongoing estimation of the ever-changing economic and political situation we are facing. This estimation continuously gives us an up-to-date assessment of who our class enemy is, their strengths and weaknesses, and what they are doing. It also gives us a corresponding assessment of ourselves. The political strategy of contending forces unfolds tactically in terms of stages and phases of development. Building a broad successful social movement to defeat our class enemy and abolish the poverty-producing economic system it upholds must be done in stages and phases. As with constructing a house, it means starting with the foundations and then proceeding to the roof.

In the United States this is going to require overcoming our deeply entrenched pragmatic notions that shackle us with a ‘fast forward remote control mentality.’



This narrow, here and now, mindset impatiently insists on fast forwarding to building the roof before building the foundation, beginning at the ending rather than at the beginning. Like other successful social movements in history, building a broad movement to end poverty today must start in its current stage of building a foundation: a core of leaders and teachers. Building a broad mass movement led by a political army of the resource-less (or as the Dr. King formulated it, “a nonviolent army or freedom church of the poor”) requires a united council of generals and an officer corps highly educated and trained in resourcefulness. Indeed, the only way to win the battle of resources will be to win and develop this indispensable and resourceful core of leaders who have the clarity, competence, commitment and connectedness to understand that the question of resources is a question of power. From a strategic standpoint, completing this initial and crucial stage of development must be the main point of concentration for every effort, both tactical and educational, of the struggle today.

### ***The Challenges of American Exceptionalism, Rugged Individualism and American Pragmatism***

The political strategy to end poverty requires the building of a broad and powerful movement led by the poor and dispossessed as a united social force. This is essentially a counter-strategy to the prevailing narrative and strategic direction of the rich. The political strategy of the rich has long been predicated on the “disunity of the bottom” so as to continue as Dr. King stated, their “cruel manipulation of the poor” in their fundamental economic and political interests. This hegemonic leadership (or leadership of the poor as a dispossessed social group) will be acquired through the difficult but determined struggle of conscious leaders to place at the forefront a program of the needs and demands of the poor and dispossessed to help them take action together.

The basic strategic question, including the question of resources, is therefore: which side will the increasingly economically insecure masses of the so-called American “middle class” be won over to? Will they continue to adapt to the programs of the rich and see the country continue to move in the direction of more impoverishment and human misery? Or will they adopt the program of the poor and move this country in the direction of abolishing poverty and obtaining real human freedom? To answer this basic strategic question in favor of building a massive movement to end poverty, we must address the problem of the American psychology in terms of raising America’s social consciousness and thereby changing the American political will.

History teaches that building or organizing a broad social movement is about more than simply mobilizing bodies. It is essentially about moving hearts and minds. For instance, American slavery had to first be abolished in mind before it was abolished in fact. Therefore, ending mental slavery was necessarily central to the political strategy and tactics of the organizing of a broad mass movement to end actual slavery. The science and art of strategy and tactics is the science and

art of the possible. Moving hearts and minds can only happen when made possible by periods of changing economic and social conditions of life.

A basic social problem or polarity that shapes all other problems or polarities defines every historical period. The objectively compelling impetus for a social movement is to address and solve that problem. Moving people's thinking requires moving first that section of the population most negatively affected by that defining problem or polarity. History teaches that those most exploited and oppressed by that problem have to assume social leadership of the overall struggle for that problem to be successfully solved. During the colonial domination of the British Crown, it was resistance of the American colonists that had to be united and brought to the forefront. Under American slavery, it was the slaves and the other most immediately affected by the Slave Power. In the battle for women suffrage, it was women. The Civil Rights Movement had to be led by African-Americans and so on. Today when the polarity between poverty and wealth is the defining problem, it is the struggles of the poor that must be brought to the forefront by mass organizing drives.

We know that learning to fix cars requires studying the science of car mechanics. Learning to heal the sick requires studying medicine. Likewise, learning to help raise social consciousness requires studying the science of society, human history, and social change. This science includes social psychology. Social psychology is governed by a particular set of shared core beliefs and values that are upheld by a legal and political super-structural institutions, which are ultimately shaped and chiefly supported by a historically developed socio-economic structure.

The most prominent aspects of these core beliefs<sup>5</sup> and values<sup>6</sup> in the US can be summed up as the ethic<sup>7</sup> of "rugged individualism." This ethic involves exaggerated notions of individual freedoms, rights, and responsibilities. It is greatly shaped by the basic philosophy of pragmatism, which is rooted in a socio-economic system driven by private profits and the assumptions of so called "American Exceptionalism."<sup>8</sup> "Good old American Pragmatism"<sup>9</sup> eschews theoretical truths and a historical perspective. Its short-termed view and action impatiently asks: "Why ask why? If it works, then it is truth, period!" The basic social belief of American pragmatists is: 'The System Works for Me and Mine Here and Now and that's all that Matters.' While European Judeo-Christian beliefs and values have also done much to shape the American personality, they have been heavily interpreted individualistically and pragmatically. Racial

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<sup>5</sup> Beliefs = assumptions, stereotypes, etc. Faith is belief based on trust not on scientific inquiry into factual evidences of practice and history. Knowledge is belief based on scientific inquiry into factual evidences of practice and history.

<sup>6</sup> Values = principles, standards, or qualities considered worthwhile, important, or of priority.

<sup>7</sup> Ethics = the philosophy and study of the moral standards or values governing much of the conduct of members of a society.

<sup>8</sup> Include an explanation of American Exceptionalism

<sup>9</sup> American pragmatism is best summed up in the motto of the Border State of Missouri, "Show Me."

considerations, inherited from the systematic slavery of African Americans and the systematic slaughter of Native American Indians, have also been shaped by and given further reinforcement to these same influences and interpretations.

These two influences – the ideology of rugged individualism and the philosophy of pragmatism - make up the strongly valued "frame of reference" or "way of thinking" of the American people and governs the way their personality views and values everything. It is not, however, individually manufactured, but rather the product of a collective experience shaped by the history of this country – from American colonization to the settlement of the rich American frontier and the long insulation of the U.S. between the two great oceans. This collective experience gave rise to the belief in the idea of "American Exceptionalism" that values:

- The individual (and individual freedoms) over the collective (and collective needs),
- The immediate over the historical,
- The short termed over the long termed,
- The perceptual over the conceptual,
- The practical movement over theoretical presentation.

To justify poverty in the midst of plenty in the U.S., American Pragmatism points to the failings of inert and inept individuals and not the failings of the profit-making market system. The fact that the historically segregated and concentrated mass of non-white "races" currently has a greater proportion of poor people reinforces evolved racial prejudices and they are therefore perceived as having more individual failures. They are the villains, not the victims, of the system. Anyone else is simply "poor white trash", a valueless individual failure that should neither be heard nor seen. It is not, then, the U.S. economic and legal system that is immoral, but these individuals. The solution that follows this analysis calls for "rugged individuals," or superheroes like "Superman" and "Superwoman." The solution is, thereby, embedded in an "I-I-Me-Me-Cowboy" mentality, raising no need whatsoever for a collectivized fight, an organization of a mass movement, or a profound social and political change to end poverty. If you are poor and as an individual can't measure up to being the "Bionic Woman" or the "Bionic Man" then you must fault yourself for your own plight. This psychology and philosophy thereby continue to block the development of a consensus about uniting the poor to abolish poverty.

It should be noted, however, that especially during major turns in U.S. history, another important element of American thinking has asserted itself: a mass recognition of the necessity of collectivism and unity of the subjected segments of the population. At different periods of social change, this thinking found active expressions in, for example, the War of Independence, the Anti-Slavery movement, the movement for Women Suffrage, and more. The subjected groups ceased to blame themselves as individuals and instead came together under the banner of the basic belief in the God-given, equal rights to "life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness". This core view and value persists in the back corners of American thought and has been brought out into the forefront time and again under increasingly excruciating conditions with the help of pointed, prolonged and dramatic agitation. Mastering U.S. history provides us with key lessons on the necessity of understanding and utilizing this critical value to move the social psychology of this country to counter the prevailing dehumanizing and destructive values and views. In fact, part of Dr. King's effectiveness in his words and work was due to his appeal to this historically ingrained element of a core sense of decency and humanity in American personality and thinking.

A central and time-tested principle of strategy is that one must concentrate most of your criticism, protest and attacks on the enemy's points of vulnerability or areas where his political influence are the weakest. One such area in especially the United States where Wall Street's narrative championing and supporting the capitalist economic system is proving the weakest, is the American health and healthcare system. The 'free clinics' projects of survival of the Black Panther Party were also effective tactics of the exposure of the class-based and unjust practices pertaining to the majority of people's health. This is despite the fact that the United States has access to state-of-the-art medical technology and expertise along with a founded creed that supposedly values the "God-given" right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Gross hypocrisy exist here in a country whose core values proclaim loudly and to the world, "the human right to life" where at the same time the whole lives of its citizen are undermined by unhealthy living and working conditions that result in a physically and mentally sick society. This widely promoted and commercialized unhealthy lifestyle fits hand-in-glove with a very profitable, but far inadequate, Medicare system dominated by large and Wall Street-connected pharmaceutical and insurance industries. Preventative Healthcare is downplayed as unreliable and unprofitable enterprises. The multi-billions of dollars spent on unhealthy food commercials drown out the necessary connection between the right to an adequate standard of living and preventative healthcare. This amounts to a wholesale promotion in the United States of the open violation of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Article 25 of which states,

*"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."*

#### **4. MORE RELEVANT HISTORICAL LESSONS FROM THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE WAR AGAINST U.S. SLAVERY**

The Vietnam War and the War against U.S. slavery are two historical examples that demonstrate effective challenges to pragmatism and the American psychology it supports.

During the Vietnam War, the narrowness and shallowness of pragmatism could not explain or withstand the prolonged movement and sustained message of the Vietnamese poor. The political will of the American people to fight in Vietnam was based on ignorant beliefs that were supported by this philosophy and that trusted the U.S. government's assessment that: (1) a tiny and poor "Communist" country, many thousands of miles away, posed a danger to a big and rich country with unmatched advanced technology and weaponry, and (2) the United States could easily and quickly defeat the Vietnamese poor with very few casualties. These superficial notions provided the Vietnamese poor with a political point of *critical vulnerability* in the War Strategy of the Powers That Be in the United States and they successfully concentrated a perseveringly protracted psychological and physical fight on this political weakness.

In *OUR OWN WORST ENEMY*, co-authors I. M. Destler, Leslie H. Gelb, Anthony Lake<sup>10</sup> concluded:

*"Power was in the political center [as opposed to the left and the right sides of the political spectrum, (my ed.)] and the foreign-policy center was owned by the Establishment, a relatively homogeneous group of bankers, lawyers, and Foreign Service officers, largely from the northeastern part of the United States, largely pragmatic and center in beliefs.*

*"The anti-Communist-policy consensus was at the heart of centrism and majorityship, and gave it steadiness and direction. But it led to rigidity as well, and in this rigidity laid the seeds of the center's destruction. The doctrines at the heart of the consensus, and their political force, called for American intervention in Vietnam. Yet these doctrines retained their appeal only so long as the United States did not have to endure a prolonged crisis, and as long as no extended sacrifice of blood or treasure was required. The iron triangle of consensus, centrism, and majorityship could survive brief failures and setbacks--the loss of China, ruptures in the Western alliance with Britain and France over their attack on the Suez Canal in 1956, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, and even the trauma of not going all out to win during the Korean War--but it did not survive Vietnam.*

*"The endless and seemingly hopeless agony of the Vietnam War destroyed the consensus..."*

To engage in this protracted struggle, the resource-less Vietnamese poor had to make creative use of their resourcefulness, e.g., through digging the extensive Tunnels of Cu Chi and building the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They used whatever resources they had or were placed at their disposal to prolong their strategic effort to defeat their enemy – both the American rich and the Vietnamese rich. With clarity and determination, they dug, cleared and maintained many miles of

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<sup>10</sup> All three co-authors are also members of the powerful Council on Foreign Relations.

the Tunnels and the Trail. There was widespread, mass participation -- the old and the children, women and men -- with picks, shovels, and spoons. When combined with other tactics, these two tremendous efforts served to sustain the struggle. This effort helped prolong their "people's war" aggravating the political contradictions and conflicts within the United States resulting from the shortsighted and pragmatic policies pursued there. The consequence was to undercut the political will or majority consensus in support of the intervention by the technologically superior American military forces. As the anti-war movement grew to historic proportion, alongside a major shift in American public opinion, the government was compelled to remove American Troops from Vietnam, opening the way for political victory for the Vietnamese poor. Their uses of the Tunnels and Trail were successful implementations of the protracted strategic doctrine of "fight and talk, talk and fight."

As mentioned earlier, the Underground Railroad played a similar role in the breaking up of the old American pro-slavery consensus. This massive resourceful and sustained operation was organized around the theft (escape) of human chattel and involved slaves, abolitionists, northern church people and others who were against the strangling encroachments of the slave holding power. Because of its mass nature, it necessarily allowed for the effective combination of the efforts of "running, writing, and speaking" abolitionists. As historian Herbert Aptheker writes in *THE NEGRO IN THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT*:

*"...it was asserted that the system [slavery] was an eminently beneficial one, with ease, contentment, and happiness as characteristic of the laboring population...*

*"...Contented, were they? ...If so, whence came these furtive, fleeting figures, half starved and in tatters, forcing their way into every corner of the nation and into Canada...*

*"...And is it not true that others among these supposed felicitous inhabitants of a patriarchal paradise fled away to congregate in the swamps and mountains of the South and form their own communities, do their own farming, stand off raiding parties, wage guerrilla warfare? We know they did...*

*"And they disturbed the nation's conscience... It made many people realize that a system, which attempted to degrade a people who, overcoming such barriers, could produce such figures, was wrong and evil and should be destroyed.*

*"...The flight of these slaves produced a keen feeling of insecurity among the slave-owners and thus moved them to severe acts of restriction which, in turn, aroused great opposition to slavery. The very appearance of numerous living testimonials to the 'joys' of the patriarchal system, the very act, on the part of Negro and white, of offering the fugitives food and shelter and advice ...had a tremendous effect in producing and developing anti-slavery feeling."<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> CITATION.

The desperate position of the slaves and the slaveholders' expanding encroachments against northern interests proved to be the *critical vulnerability* of the Slave System in the U.S., a system that was supposedly a "benevolent peculiar institution." American thinking in support of slavery was successfully challenged and changed with the indispensable aid of the creative and protracted fight of the anti-slavery "under ground" and above ground network.

These two examples show how American social consciousness was shaken all the way to its ideological foundation. All of U.S. history has reinforced and revealed an American thinking that places a higher value on practical movements than on theoretical explanations, but proceeding from where the American people are – as opposed to where they ain't – has proven to be the most effective approach to organizing around and against the prevailing philosophy of pragmatism. This approach finds expression in the doctrine of a protracted and sustained effort to "show n' tell", "walk and talk", "fight and teach," which should guide our thinking and activities in today's struggle to end poverty in the midst of plenty.

Just as in these historical examples, a sustained or prolonged mass movement of the poor and dispossessed challenges a cruelly unjust society defended by pragmatic notions that are shallow and untrue. What is proving to be a point of *critical vulnerability* of the current American system is the economic class issue raised by the social position and militant posture of the growing ranks of the poor in the richest country in the world. Protracted campaigns of well-orchestrated dramatic pressures directed at this political and moral weakness could play a pivotal role in striking an abolishing blow to poverty.

This short summary of the American social psychology explains in part the need for a New "Underground Railroad": a wide and vast network of projects of survival that serve as bases of operation for ending a poverty-producing system. The other reason for this network is to address the urgency of the situation we are facing, keeping in mind that this reality of growing poverty and inequality are the weakest point of vulnerability of the current economic and political system and its advocates. With the continuing downsizing of jobs and the dismantling of the "welfare state," the forces arrayed against us have little choice but to misdirect a fledgling movement led by the poor and strangle its independent political message in the cradle. They will do this by means of diverting resources away from this movement and toward the building of a "loyal opposition" or "civil society" committed to, at most, highly profiled efforts to manage public perception about being "anti-poverty" and "reducing" poverty but not taking actual steps toward ending it.

Our task must be to both help develop ways to counter these political moves and to build the resources necessary to sustain a prolonged, independent multi-faceted effort to win the "hearts and minds" of the majority of the people in this country. We must win them to an understanding of their own interests in aligning with the program of the poor to end poverty everywhere, rather than to the

program of the rich to maintain a poverty-producing system. These efforts must constitute a "one-two punch" combination of [1] *fighting* -- building a broad and protracted movement led by the poor as a united and organized force and [2] *teaching* -- propagating the political message of abolishing poverty forever. The first step or stage in accomplishing this strategy is the development of a large, sophisticated and committed core of leaders and teachers, particularly but not exclusively from the ranks of the poor. Taking this first step will require the concentration of all our efforts. It is the most difficult and decisive step in building this movement and will necessitate independent resources creatively drawn from our growing network, i.e., a new "Underground Railroad."

## **5. MAXIMIZING THE USE OF THE INTELLECTUAL AND MATERIAL RESOURCES OF A GROWING NETWORK TO UNITE THE POOR**

As the saying goes, *'the rich get richer and the poor write grant proposals.'*

Strategically, the rich are not going to fund or provide resources for anything that is independent of and counter to their program or leadership as the ruling class. Tactically, their corporate foundations will continue to fund individual projects here and there, but from the standpoint of their overall economic interests and political strategy.

Again, the indispensable ingredient needed to develop the resources required to ensure the direction and growth of a movement to end poverty is the creativity or resourcefulness of its membership (the resource-less). This capacity rests on an expanding core of leaders that is firmly based on and motivated by *'commitment not compensation.'* In fact, the development of this committed core of leaders itself has proven to be the most important resource of a movement. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) was an organization of poor and homeless families fighting for their lives. Its dramatic actions and campaigns made it a force to be reckoned with in the city of Philadelphia and in the state of Pennsylvania. Since its inception, KWRU and its leaders exhibited commitment and creativity, taking advantage of any and every means placed at its disposal. In fact, in all the marches, bus tours, and world summits it spearheaded, KWRU always relied on its own resourcefulness and not simply on grant proposals. In 1996, when it announced and mounted a 7-day march from Ridgeville (a homeless tent city) to Ridge's Mansion in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, KWRU had absolutely no money. There were many naysayers who said that we would have to wait for a big grant of money before we took our first step on that march. Yet from beginning to end, KWRU was able to identify and successfully tap into a little bit of the tremendous abundance of this land of plenty.

The kind of anti-poverty movement we need to be building today must be free of the financial dependency on the corporate philanthrop, strategy, and



programmatic influences of the rich and all their representatives whether from the "left," right, or center of the political spectrum.

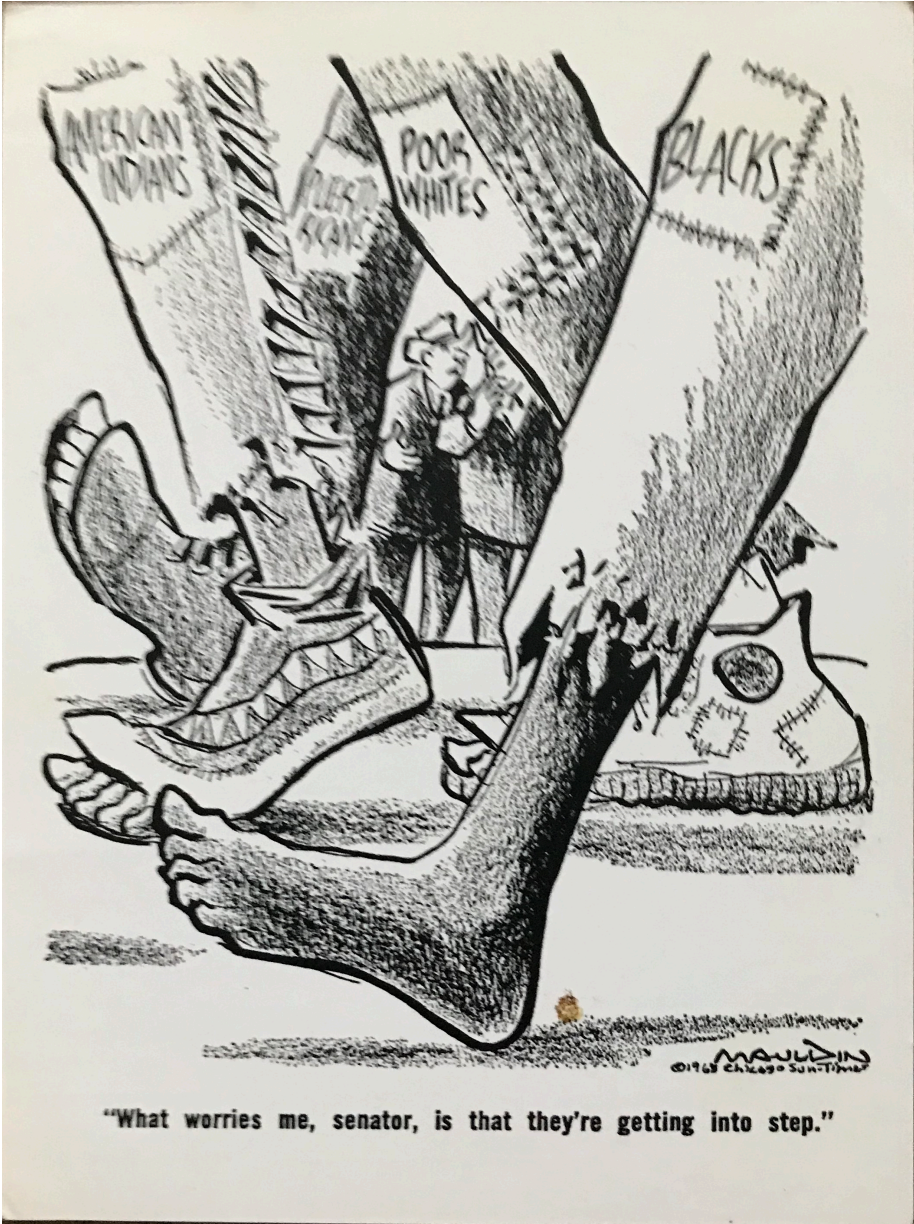
Indeed, definite and immediate tactical possibilities exist here and now in "the richest country in the world" for securing considerable resources from the unprecedented surpluses in the U.S. to help sustain and build a movement to end poverty led by the poor. Surplus time, surplus skilled services, surplus goods and money, etc., are all functional equivalents of the social contradictions favorable to the building of unified movements of poor people in less developed countries. Poverty in the land of plenty - with an unheard of and rapidly increasing productive capacity - is a social paradox that can be exploited, provided that the resource-less makes use of their unique resourcefulness. Our growing network to unite and organize the poor represents a huge reservoir of this nation's untapped surpluses of geniuses, talents and skills. This reserve of resources will be the food and fuel for our new "Underground Railroad" and will ground our efforts to unite the poor into today's new and unsettling force.

### ***A few considerations and suggestions from past political work***

- Development of an independent *Netwar* Communication Committee and Infrastructure making maximum use of the lower-cost internet and communications technology available today.
  - Mastering the use of computers and Internet technology serves to reduce the enormous cost of local, regional, national and global transportation.
  - The cheaper costs of the use of communications media can facilitate education and organizing work.
  - Most of the middle-income strata, and particularly its youth, are online, who spend upwards of 8 hours a day online. More and more, this includes poor and debt-burdened high school, college and graduate student populations. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers' campaigns and Human Rights Tech have shown the powerful potential in using an advanced media infrastructure.
- A strategic approach to religion that transforms the current work of churches with the poor, particularly the vast network of food banks, into resources for organizing.
- Constructing an extended network of every kind of project of survival. This would include researching, setting up and connecting up with existing free clinics and community care projects that include community gardens, preventative healthcare and healthy food education, etc.
- Research and ongoing assessment of the strategic and tactical direction of corporate and community foundations, with a view to identifying grant possibilities if tactically necessary and expedient. The overall aim is not to be strategically dependent on this source of funding but to creatively take advantage of any opportunity that presents itself.
- Use of a multi-pronged art and culture strategy, including touring choirs and art exhibits like the Jubilee Singers of old. On their 1998 Freedom Bus Tour the Kensington Welfare Rights Union formed an Adult and Youth Economic Human

Rights Choir. Their different renditions of protest songs helped maintained the unity and strong sense of purpose of the political tour. *Rich Man's House* was one of the songs they created, adapting some of the chorus and melody from the Gospel song, *The Enemy's Camp*. It continues to be used and now has a life of its own.

- Use of a systematic and comprehensive survey of members' talents
- Speakers and Preachers Bureaus touring religious institutions and small colleges and universities (particularly in small and medium—sized towns and cities)
- Library Systems (due to DVDs reaching critical mass, the setting up of a University of the Poor Library System, including movies, documentaries, etc.) and Clearing Centers to support and encourage self-study and research as well as collective education
- Use of international connections and social forces whose interests are aligning and/or coinciding with ours, including foreign donations.
- Use of network expertise in technical training
- Tapping into local Food Distributions centers
- Fundraising for group shopping at Dollar Stores, Flea Markets and Garage sales, etc.
- Use of Government, hotel, other sources of surpluses
- "Their Trash is Our Treasure" operations (Rich neighborhoods' Trash Days and End of College Semester trash days or discard tables)
- Clandestine activities, which amount simultaneously to protests against unjust laws as well as steps to establish projects of survival
- Contributions of Storage places are critical
- Collection of financial pledges from individual donors
- Housing: extra blankets, tents, heaters and portable appliances. Experiences in pooling rent in group living in the "Human Rights Houses" different groupings in the Network adopting of group housings.
- Small business projects
- Regular social parties for fundraising
- Use of Internet for Merchandising
- Literacy Training programs
- Movie nights and other forms of free recreation and entertainment



"What worries me, senator, is that they're getting into step."