

Poor People in D.C.

Resurrection City

Chris Singer

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — It is almost like any other American city.

Resurrection City has its problems too. Mayor Ralph Abernathy and City Manager Jesse Jackson face: inadequate city funds; housing shortages; water pollution; and, a generation gap that has led to troubles with the city “police.”

But then it isn’t any other city. Resurrection City exists because the King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference decided that the survival of one-fifth of American citizens was so in peril, it had to be dramatized by bringing thousands of poor to camp on the doorstep of Congress.

They call it the Poor People’s Campaign, and the King wanted it to be a tactically nonviolent demand for legislative action that would eliminate the dire poverty that exists in the richest nation in the history of man. The King is dead, but the SCLC has made the campaign a success, so far.

Resurrection City sits across the street from the Lincoln Memorial in West Potomac Park. Behind it rises the Washington Monument, and on the side of it is the reflecting pool, formerly called “the Mall,” now called the Martin Luther King Pavilion.

Set off from the rest of the park by a green, wooden snow fence, the City has a population of more than 3000 persons. They are housed in plywood A-frame shanties; 10 by 20 feet big with plastic sheeting — for roofs, forming a kind of romantic skylight for the shanties. The shanties are unfinished, save for the decorations their residents have added.

One shanty is dedicated “the Brother Malcolm X Shabazz Center.” Another is called “New Kenya.” Another bears identification of Students for a Democratic Society. Many are labeled the homes of the various street gangs residing in the city.

There are two large tents in the City. One, a tan and faded pink affair that is rather ragged looking, is the dining tent. The other is called “Soul City.”

Soul City is dedicated to the creativity and history of blacks. The sound and feel of Afro-America comes from Soul City every day, as records of the black man’s music are played, and black artists perform for City residents.

The SCLC has carried Soul City outside too, and every evening on the Martin Luther King Pavilion black culture is presented to “educate the public.” Abraham Lincoln seems to look down from his chair at poetry, plays, and music performed by a host of artists some famous and some obscure every night.

Of course, the main attraction is Resurrection City. It’s not easy to get into. The SCLC has a sense of fatalism now that they have never shown so openly before. Jesse Jackson is keenly aware that all visitors may not be friendly. He has been pleading with Abernathy not to move into the City, because Abernathy would be too vulnerable there, according to Jackson.

The City’s Peace Keepers are made up of youths from urban streets. They are a singularly tough bunch. Visitors learn not to argue with these “police.”

The Peace Keepers are supervised, and largely composed of, Blackstone Rangers from South Side Chicago. They have been strict and uncompromising in their duties. Sometimes, according to the SCLC, they've been too tough. Two newsmen, a photographer and a reporter, were beaten up when they refused to obey a Peace Keeper's directives.

What is even worse, according to most newsmen, is that they've been "asked" to "donate" money to the City by some of the Peace Keepers. This seems a favorite militant tactic. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has been doing this for years, as establishment reporters covering H. Rap Brown have found out.

If you can convince a Peace Keeper that you have a very good reason for being there, you might get into the City. Then you can walk down Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard like a tourist of Sorts.

On your tour you would see that about half the residents are youths, unmarried and independent. The other residents are families. African clothing is prevalent, and those not dressed in African attire wear the uniform of militancy, denim jackets, boots, dark shirts, jewelry of some kind, usually tikis or beads.

Most men, and a good many women, wear natural hairdos. All the residents aren't black, of course. Many are poor whites from Appalachia, Mexican-Americans and American-Indians from the west, and Puerto Rican-Americans from the northeast.

The sensitive visitor can detect a uniformity of purpose in these people. They are tough. They are militant. They will not return to their homes until they see results.

Until the Congress acts to meet their demands, Resurrection City will be their home.

There is a kind of generation gap in the City. How wide it is no one can tell right now. But already some 40 of the younger residents have been given bus tickets by the SCLC and sent home.

Seemingly the younger people are not as dedicated to tactical nonviolence as the SCLC would like. Campaigners were required to pledge in writing their commitment to nonviolence before joining.

Apparently some of the youths who have come off the city streets of the North aren't as completely sold on nonviolence as they claimed they were when they joined the Campaign. But the SCLC needs them as the Rangers and Father James Groppi's Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council Commandos and the Memphis Invaders, are all peculiarly equipped to maintain order in the City.

Besides doing their job, they accomplish a secondary task in keeping the leadership running, preventing them from even for a moment relenting on their own militant attitude.

The campaigners did not move into a vacuum, and this is related to the revolutionary attitudes of the younger residents of the City. What they decide to do could easily determine the outcome of the Campaign.

Washington establishment types are still reeling in shock from the SDS assault on the Pentagon at the October Confrontation. Washington is still recovering from the four day uprising that took place following the murder of the King. And, in something quite unrelated, but still affecting the atmosphere, a Washington bus driver was killed by a thug in front of horrified passengers.

Washington is like any other city including Detroit, in that bus drivers are easy targets for thieves. This driver went for a gun he carried and was shot to death by a robber. It happened the week people moved into Resurrection City and helped create an uptight atmosphere.

Official Washington is frightened, especially of the June 19 support march that is expected to draw more than a million marchers to the city. The Washington Public Safety Director is studying, not whether to, but rather where he can station federal troops. The city's police department has set up an elaborate riot command center in a secret location.

A "hot line" telephone network has been installed in the offices of U.S. Senators to apprise them of any violent situation. The establishment seemingly feels, as Michigan Governor George Romney does: "It is better to overreact than underact."

What the urban youths, with their revolutionary attitude and lack of complete commitment to nonviolence, do in the face of these developments remains to be seen. But it is obvious that they hold the key to the future of Resurrection City.

The King conceived of Resurrection City and influenced its officials.

Malcolm X conceived of the attitudes of many of the City's residents and influenced their political thinking.

It may end up being an explosive mixture of ideas.

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