

# VAULTS OF OPPORTUNITY

## The Aftermath of the “I Have a Dream” Speech

BY ERIC TEGLER

The opening of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s renowned 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech eloquently used the logic of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to frame the idea that people of color, like all Americans, are guaranteed equal, inalienable rights.

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ing called the words of the two documents a “promissory note” on which America had defaulted. The nation had, in effect, given its Negro citizens a bad check, he said, adding, “But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.”

Inasmuch as King intended the speech to decry the lack of equal treatment of black Americans, his vision for them and for the nation turned on the promise of opportunity. The years that followed his seminal speech were about opening the vaults, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

The “I Have a Dream” speech has been called many things, nearly all of them laudatory. While its content and King’s inspirational delivery assuredly make it one of the great pieces of writing and oration of the 20th century, less often recognized is its remarkable brevity. In a little more than 1,500 words, King framed the hopes and demands of the 200,000-plus people gathered around the Lincoln Memorial for the civil rights March on Washington and of black Americans across the country.

No other speaker that day in late August moved the crowd the way King did. His impact was far wider, transcending those present and those who supported the civil rights movement thanks in part to landmark television and press coverage. While the microphones amplified King’s speech, its core ideas captured the imagination of a large chunk of white America and of people around the world.

“On that occasion he said what had to be said,” Dr. Clayborne Carson acknowledges. “One of the reasons the speech is so wonderful is that it’s cogent and emotionally powerful because it is concise.”

Carson is the director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, a professor of history, and founder/editor of the King Papers Project, established at the request of Coretta Scott King to edit and publish her husband’s papers.

The compactness and the partly improvised nature of King’s speech are wonderful in their own right, but the address’ real significance lies in the role it played in calling attention to and building support for the civil rights movement and subsequent legislation. Sometimes forgotten is the fact that the event at which King gave his seminal speech was formally called the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.”

Black Americans weren’t just seeking the opportunity to sit where they liked on a bus or to be served alongside whites at lunch counters; they wanted the opportunity to carve out the lives of prosperity and the freedom of action the majority enjoyed. In this sense, King’s allusion to “vaults of opportunity” is just as important as his dream of racial harmony.

“The metaphor of ‘insufficient funds,’” Carson says, “is something that most Americans understand. The speech is metaphorically rich and one of the things about metaphorically rich literature is that it helps people understand – it says, ‘this is like something else.’ It’s the essence of good writing, trying to use metaphors and parables that people are familiar with to explain something that’s a little more complicated.”

Of course, civil rights were more complicated than a large crowd and a rousing speech. King intended the March on Washington to trigger action. Those who helped craft the



President Lyndon B. Johnson reaches out to shake Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s hand after signing the Voting Rights Act in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C., Aug. 6, 1965. The Voting Rights Act was one of two pieces of significant civil rights legislation passed in the wake of the March on Washington.

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speech were agreed that its real message was “reform of the legal system.”

### A Legislative Goal

It was for that purpose that King had met with President John F. Kennedy in 1962 and with President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. Kennedy had stated his intention to introduce a civil rights bill, but not until the April 1963 Birmingham, Ala., demonstration and King’s subsequent arrest was the President spurred into action. The legislation, however, faced dim prospects in Congress, and with an election coming, King feared that Kennedy’s enthusiasm for the bill was fading.

“My impression from the meetings,” Carson opines, “is that they had a cordial relationship but they were different types of people ... It was important that they communicated with each other and respected each other, but in both cases there were some strains in the relationship. Part of that was because neither president wanted protests that were going to distract them from what they figured were other, more important concerns.”

But for King there was no more important concern, both personally and for the nation. It prompted him to remind America of “the fierce urgency of now” in the “I Have a Dream” speech. He repeated the call to legislative action following the speech in a September article titled “In a Word – Now.”

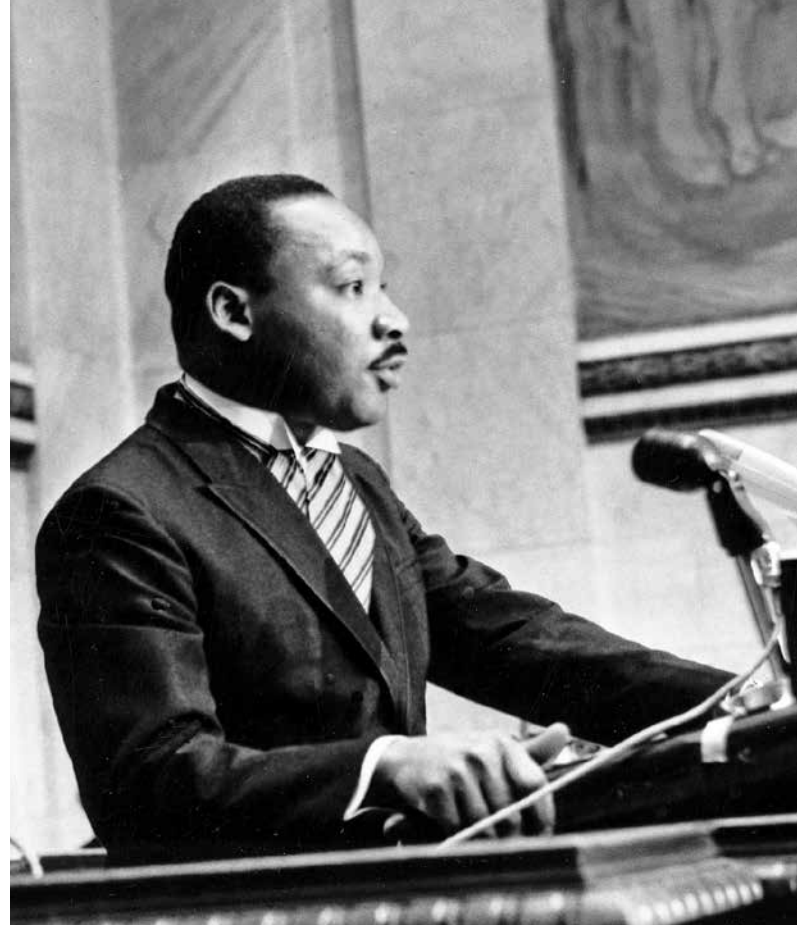
“What next?” he wrote, “The hundreds of thousands who marched in Washington marched to level barriers. They summed up everything in a word – NOW. What is the content of NOW?”

**President Lyndon B. Johnson, center, meets with civil rights leaders (from left) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, and James Farmer in the Oval Office in January 1964. (Though not pictured here, Roy Wilkins and Lee White were also present at the meeting.)**

Everything, not some things, in the President’s civil rights bill is part of NOW.”

“Now” would have to wait a little longer. The assassination of Kennedy in November 1963 threatened to derail civil rights legislation entirely. No one, including King, was confident that Johnson would carry forward the bill that Kennedy had introduced. What’s more, the movement itself showed signs of decelerating despite King’s momentous performance in Washington three months prior.

Sparse turnout at a November rally in Danville, Va., suggested that the civil rights leader would have trouble launching a planned campaign there. According to author/historian Nick Kotz (*Judgment Days*, 2005), King was truly concerned that the civil rights movement was losing momentum and undecided as to the tactics his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) should use to pressure Congress into approving legislation. Meeting in New York with key advisers, he was urged



**Left:** President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1964 Civil Rights Act as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others look on. **Right:** King delivers his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in the auditorium of Oslo University in Norway on Dec. 10, 1964. King is the youngest person ever to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and was recognized for his leadership in the civil rights movement and for advocating nonviolence.

to launch a new campaign, both to re-energize the movement and to forestall the mantle of civil rights leadership from passing to younger, more radical men.

In an interview for his most recent book (*Martin's Dream*, 2013), Carson reflected on the generational dynamics within the movement when asked about his own trip to the March on Washington: "I was intensely attracted to the civil rights activism of the early 1960s and eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to attend the march shortly after attending a student conference at Indiana University. Although I wanted to see King's concluding remarks, I was also drawn to the younger activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC]."

Differences of opinion about how best to advance civil rights existed long before the "Dream" speech and persisted thereafter. Nevertheless, Carson says that in 1963-1964, those in the movement knew they had a common goal.

"I think everyone knew that they were on the same team. There were tactical and timing differences [within the movement] and sometimes harsh words between people like James Forman [then secretary of the SNCC] and King. John Lewis [SNCC chairman] was, in some respects, closer to King's position. Part of it was age. Young people are less patient than people who are somewhat older and less willing to recognize that you could do something that's counterproductive."

King stayed focused on bringing civil rights laws into force as soon as possible.

In a Jan. 4, 1964, column in the *New York Amsterdam News*, he reiterated that legislation was "the order of the day at the great March on Washington last summer. The Negro and his compatriots for self-respect and human dignity will not be denied."

He pressed that message at a meeting with Johnson at the White House 12 days later. As he did so, his prominence as the country's foremost civil rights leader was cemented by his appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine as its Man of the Year for 1963. Ratification of the 24th Amendment, ending the poll tax for federal elections (an often overlooked victory), in late January suggested the drive for legislation had accelerated.

The civil rights bill passed the House of Representatives in mid-February 1964, but stalled in the Senate due to a filibuster by Southern senators that lasted 75 days. When at last the bill passed the Senate, King praised it as one that would "bring practical relief to the Negro in the South, and will give the Negro in the North a psychological boost that he sorely needs."

On July 2, Johnson signed the new Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law with King and other civil rights leaders present. The law prohibited racial discrimination in employment and education and outlawed racial segregation in public facilities. It was a momentous step and a personal victory for King, who nonetheless recognized that there was work yet to be done.



Tear gas fills the air as activists marching from Selma, Ala., to the state capital of Montgomery are stopped by state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, on what came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.” The state troopers, ordered by Alabama Gov. George Wallace, broke up the march with nightsticks and tear gas.



### **Highs and Lows and a March for Voting Rights**

The remainder of the year was a mixed one for King, the low coming later in the summer when he was stoned in Harlem by black Muslims who were at odds with his policy of nonviolence. The highs came in the fall and winter. In September, he visited Berlin at the invitation of its mayor, Willy Brandt. The civil rights leader figuratively walked in the footsteps of his father, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., who had visited Nazi-dominated Berlin in 1934 for an international Baptist gathering.

King Jr. drew large enthusiastic crowds and made an unauthorized trip to East Germany, across the Berlin Wall, where he was similarly received. He stayed in Europe several additional days, receiving a private audience with the Pope. In December, he flew to Oslo, where he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming at 35 years old its youngest-ever recipient.

**While disagreements over King’s style and nonviolent approach were publicly aired by militant activists from Malcolm X to Bobby Seale, differences with conservative civil rights leaders were less high profile. King’s tactics of gaining public sympathy by confronting segregationists with mass protests were criticized by a number of influential leaders, including Thurgood Marshall.**



Marchers cross the Alabama River on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., on March 21, 1965, the first day of the five-day march to Montgomery, Ala. They were marching for voting rights for blacks, who were often discouraged from registering to vote, particularly in small Southern towns.

AP PHOTO







**Above:** Three women, at left, process voter registration applications from several hundred black Americans at the Sumter County Courthouse in Americus, Ga., on Aug. 9, 1965, three days after the signing of the Voting Rights Act.  
**Right:** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks about the Vietnam War in New York City in 1967.

The recognition was welcome if exhausting. Still, King remained focused on the next big civil rights goal – ensuring that blacks were truly enfranchised. That meant formally prohibiting practices used to limit black voting including literacy tests and state election poll taxes.

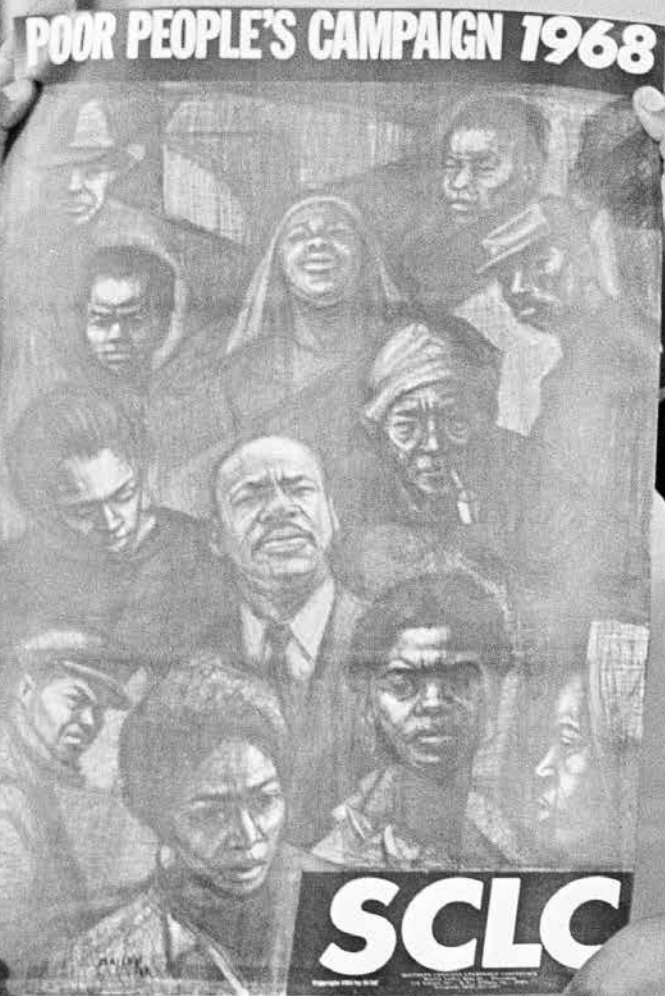
Swept into office in a landslide victory in the presidential race of 1964, Johnson was – civil rights leaders believed – in a solid position to mandate a push for legislation on voting rights. But as 1965 began, they perceived that the President was dragging his feet. King raised the issue with Johnson, but Carson relates that the President essentially told him that the time was not propitious for the voting rights campaign. Johnson had recently introduced a raft of Great Society legislation, much of which was going to help the black community, he said.

King's next move, in hindsight, was to be expected. His activism over the previous decade had been predicated on action calculated to draw public attention to racial inequities – from the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott to his arrest and subsequent jailing for demonstrating without a permit during the Birmingham campaign in 1963.





**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reveals on March 4, 1968, a poster planned to be used during the Poor People's Campaign later that spring and summer.**



When in February 1965 white segregationists attacked a peaceful group of demonstrators in Marion, Ala. – one of whom was fatally shot by a state trooper – King and the SCLC planned a protest march from Selma to the state capitol of Montgomery, 54 miles distant. Some 600 people set out from Selma on March 7, shortly finding themselves facing an array of Alabama state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge wielding nightsticks and tear gas. Images captured on television of the troopers rushing the marchers outraged many Americans, again thrusting civil rights and voting rights into the national spotlight.

Keenly aware of that spotlight, King himself led another attempt to walk to Montgomery on March 9. State troopers again blocked the road; King and the marchers held a short prayer session at the

Edmund Pettus Bridge, then returned to Selma to await the time to make another attempt. Alabama state officials tried to prevent the march from going forward, but on March 17, a U.S. district court judge ordered they permit it. The march and attendant media coverage forced Johnson's hand.

“The way King describes it,” Carson recounts, “is that Johnson said the timing was not right and through these protests the timing changed. Ultimately Johnson had to recognize that and introduce the legislation.”

The President appeared on national television to pledge his support and lobby for new voting rights legislation he would introduce in Congress. The march resumed on March 21, protected by U.S. Army and Alabama National Guard troops. Four days later, the marchers reached Montgomery.

By July, the Voting Rights Act had passed the Senate and House with large majorities. Johnson signed the act into law on Aug. 6, once more in the presence of King and other civil rights leaders.

King was undeniably a catalyst for change, consistent in his approach, consistently at the center of public attention. That approach did not sit well with many in the movement.

“There were lots of gradations from King’s position to the NAACP’s [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] position and everything in between,” Carson acknowledges.

While disagreements over King’s style and nonviolent approach were publicly aired by militant activists from Malcolm X to Bobby Seale, differences with conservative civil rights leaders were less high profile. King’s tactics of gaining public sympathy by confronting segregationists with mass protests were criticized by a number of influential leaders, including Thurgood Marshall.

Marshall, chief counsel for the NAACP, preferred a legalistic approach to achieving racial equality. Reflecting on the era in an interview with author and political pundit Juan Williams, he said of King’s street protest tactics:

“I didn’t believe in that. I thought you had the right to disobey the law and you have the right to go to jail for it,” adding, “I used to have a lot of fights with Martin about his theory.”

Though he considered him an opportunist, Marshall conceded that King’s influence was vast. King’s starring role in the movement inevitably made him the target of criticism, and Carson says that the NAACP thought the protests were actually making its job harder in terms of lobbying and passing legislation.

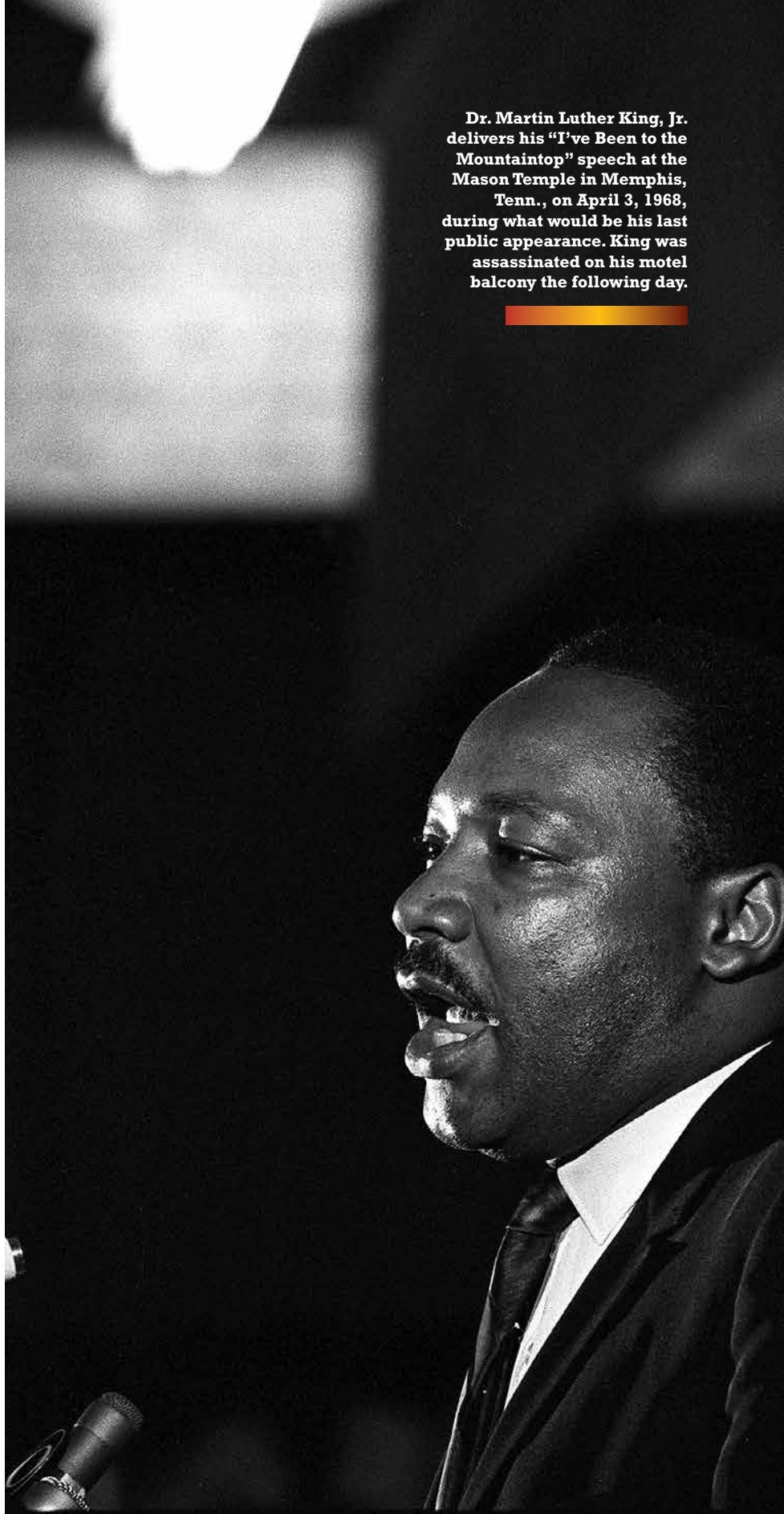
“Sometimes they were probably right, sometimes they were probably wrong. Without the activism, what legal cases do you have to try and win? If there is only activism, how do you get [legislative] victories?”

However influence was wielded, major legislative victory had been achieved. As 1966 rolled in, King was already extending his vision. Poverty and the Vietnam War would become the causes to which he would direct his energy.

### **Freedom and Opportunity for All**

In January 1966, King moved into a Chicago slum tenement to highlight the living conditions of the poor. He planned further marches to call attention to poverty in

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tenn., on April 3, 1968, during what would be his last public appearance. King was assassinated on his motel balcony the following day.**





Chicago and initiated a campaign to end discrimination in housing, employment, and schools in the city. In June, he joined the March Against Fear from Memphis, Tenn., to Jackson, Miss. Stokely Carmichael's "Black Power" speech at a rally during the march exemplified internal divisions between the old guard and new guard, the SNCC's "Black Power" slogan now competing with SCLC's "Freedom Now."

But for some time King had been moving in his own direction, Carson observes.

"I think he was already moving away from working with the NAACP. I think he was beginning to see things in a broader sense, and I think the movement as a whole was beginning to broaden. When President Johnson gave his speech at Howard University [1965] using the idea that you couldn't simply remove the barriers to opportunity without changing the structure of opportunity – that got into the war on poverty. It wasn't just King who was moving away from the civil rights agenda; the movement was moving away. That had been accomplished. Jim Crow had been defeated. That was the wonderful victory of 1965."

As various marches and campaigns unfolded in the United States, black and white soldiers were fighting and dying in Vietnam. King spoke about the war in front of a crowd at New York City's Riverside Church in April 1967. In a speech titled "Beyond Vietnam," he asserted that the war effort was "taking the young black men who have been crippled by our society and sending them 13,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem."

His message was not well received, with critics objecting to the idea of fusing the civil rights and peace movements. Whatever the reaction, King remained philosophically consistent, adhering to the notion of nonviolence, which he had traveled to India to study. His objections to war in general and to Vietnam were in place well before the speech, Carson contends.

"He was always critical of the war. But his position was that he had to give the administration time to negotiate. Taking a public stand against the war would undermine his relationship with Johnson. Johnson sent [United Nations] Ambassador Arthur Goldberg to talk to King and convince him that if he took a public stand against the war, it would encourage the

North Vietnamese to believe that if they simply sustained the violence, they would eventually win because of [American] anti-war sentiment. Goldberg advised King that being quiet and not undermining the stance of Johnson was better. King bought that for a while until he began to see that the negotiations were not really designed to end the war."

In late 1967, King furthered his anti-poverty advocacy by announcing the start of the Poor People's Campaign, the aim of which was jobs and freedom for the poor of all races. A march on Washington to demand an Economic Bill of Rights guaranteeing employment for the able, incomes for those unable to work, and an end to housing discrimination was planned.

For King, the idea was logically complementary with his anti-war stance, reflecting views that were universal.

"That was always what he was trying to do," Carson explains. "He was trying to broaden the focus of the movement. He wanted the movement to deal with human rights issues in the broadest sense of the term."

But by 1968, King was losing his following. The SCLC lacked the organizational punch it had deployed early in the decade. In March, a protest he led turned violent, a first for one of his events. Then, at sunset on April 4, King was fatally shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

The ensuing national riots, arrests, and, finally, King's funeral left the movement and America in general emotionally spent. Had King lived, perhaps the Poor People's Campaign and associated causes would have gone forward.

"The Poor People's Campaign was in pretty bad shape when King was assassinated. It didn't look like it was going to succeed," Carson allows. "But one could also look at the campaign to get the 1964 Civil Rights Act through. When Kennedy was assassinated, if you had asked most observers whether a strong civil rights bill would pass or not pass, they'd probably have said no. Maybe with King around [the Poor People's Campaign] might have gone forward. He was pretty good tactically."

In a way, his last campaign illustrates the fullness of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Dream as well or better than those that preceded it. It was the broadest expression of his wish to open the vaults of opportunity to all – black, white, American.