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SUCCEEDING KING:
RALPH DAVID ABERNATHY, SCLC, AND THE LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A Thesis presented
in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Arch Dalrymple III Department of History
The University of Mississippi

By
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December 2017

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ABSTRACT

As president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as America's most prominent civil rights activist during the late 1950s and the 1960s. Due to his eloquent speeches and ability to organize large-scale nonviolent protests, King inspired numerous individuals to participate in a grassroots movement for equal rights. After earning two landmark victories with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, King and his SCLC colleagues shifted the focus of their work to improving economic opportunities for America's poor citizens. To combat poverty, King planned an ambitious protest designed to force Lyndon Johnson and the U.S. Congress to face the stark reality that millions of Americans remained impoverished. Yet an assassin killed King weeks before the launch of his Poor People's Campaign. As a result, Ralph David Abernathy, King's designated successor, inherited the daunting task of leading the largest direct action campaign since the Voting Rights March three years earlier. In addition to directing the campaign, Abernathy encountered a series of unfavorable circumstances as he attempted to advance King's goal of eradicating poverty by fundamentally altering America's economic and political systems. These circumstances included a poor relationship with Johnson and his successor, Richard Nixon, internal dissension within SCLC, and increasing apathy from the American public. Despite these obstacles, Abernathy fought to keep SCLC and the civil rights movement alive for nearly a decade. In order to understand the diminishing influence of the movement in the 1970s, one must examine Abernathy's tumultuous tenure as SCLC president.

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INTRODUCTION

In the frantic hours after an assassin's bullet struck Martin Luther King Jr. on the balcony of Memphis' Lorraine Motel, Ralph David Abernathy struggled to process the sudden death of his closest friend. When a reporter questioned Abernathy about the details of King's death, the co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) failed to provide any response. A follow-up question prompted Abernathy to describe the details of his first encounter with King in Montgomery fourteen years earlier, yet he ignored the reporter's requests for a statement on the riots that broke out in cities across America that evening.¹

For Abernathy, King's sudden death brought on more than the usual feelings of grief and despair that accompany the loss of a dear friend. It meant that he had to take over King's post as SCLC president and guide the organization just as the focus of the civil rights movement shifted from legal equality to enhanced economic opportunity. Although King recognized the need to implement a succession plan for the SCLC in the event of his incapacitation, planning for such a morbid scenario unsettled Abernathy. In fact, when King first broached the subject more than three years before his assassination, Abernathy tried to talk him out of officially designating a successor. When he saw that King had no intention of leaving the matter unresolved, Abernathy suggested Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson as worthy candidates to potentially follow King as SCLC president. According to Abernathy, King valued continuity and he believed the organization would only stay the course if his right-hand man succeeded him. King told

¹ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 767.

Abernathy that “you are the only person who could keep the team together. And if the team stays together, then the program will come out of the team.”²

This study begins with Abernathy’s promotion to SCLC president in 1968. The first chapter examines the first ten months of Abernathy’s presidential tenure with a focus on the Poor People’s Campaign, the final project King planned before his death. In the wake of the assassination, Abernathy decided to move forward with the campaign and SCLC launched the ambitious project in May. The second chapter analyzes SCLC’s decision to assist in the organizing and execution of the Charleston hospital strike in the spring and early summer of 1969. Abernathy committed the organization to join with the local activists in Charleston after he received a telegram from Mary Moultrie, the leader of the dozen black female employees who lost their jobs at the Medical College of South Carolina (MCH) after a failed attempt to unionize.³ The third chapter explores Abernathy’s final years as SCLC president and his subsequent quest for a congressional seat. In early 1977, Abernathy resigned from the organization he co-founded after a twenty-year tenure as an SCLC officer. When Jimmy Carter tapped Andrew Young to become America’s first African-American U.N. Ambassador, Abernathy entered the special election to fill Young’s vacant seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.⁴ The chapter examines the evolution of the civil rights movement, from nonviolent demonstrations to the splintering of civil rights organizations and the decision made by many civil rights activists, including Abernathy, to resign their leadership positions with civil rights groups and pursue political careers.

² Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 475-478.

³ Mary Moultrie to Ralph David Abernathy and Andy Young, telegram, March 22, 1969, SCLC Papers, Box 57, Folder 9, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁴ Abernathy, 584-85.

Martin Luther King Jr. serves as the focus of much of the existing scholarship on the SCLC and the leadership of the civil rights movement. Historians frequently mention Ralph David Abernathy and two of the most prominent civil rights scholars, Taylor Branch and David J. Garrow, interviewed Abernathy for their multi-volume works. Yet Abernathy remains a secondary figure in many monographs, perhaps due to his unwavering public support of King. Years after his resignation from SCLC, Abernathy acknowledged that his steadfast loyalty to King might have led some of his colleagues to overlook his contributions to the organization's campaigns, "I'm sure it seemed to them that I was no more than an appendage to Martin, someone who served as a part companion, part bodyguard, but who never played an important role in the decisions that affected the direction of the movement."⁵

Both Branch and Garrow conclude their studies of the SCLC and the civil rights movement with King's assassination. In addition, Adam Fairclough devoted a chapter of his monograph on the SCLC to Abernathy's presidency. Fairclough argues that Abernathy's decision to remain a loyal partner to King cost him the opportunity to develop his own leadership style. As a result, Fairclough believes Abernathy's efforts "to emulate King's intellectual style" failed to resonate with the SCLC staff and caused the organization to founder in the early 1970s.⁶

Labor historians Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg have also studied Abernathy, primarily through a comprehensive analysis of the Charleston hospital workers' strike. Fink and Greenberg devoted a chapter to the strike in their 1989 monograph on Local 1199, the national hospital workers' union. The authors illuminate the goals of Local 1199, the SCLC, the strike's participants, and Charleston's African American residents concluding that, while a clear victory

⁵ Abernathy, 478

⁶ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 389.

eluded all three groups, each constituency achieved notable gains as a result of the strike.⁷ Other historians, such as, Christopher P. Lehman, described the strike as a victory for the SCLC while scholar Steve Estes posits that the strike resulted in financial and political empowerment for the city's black residents.⁸

Gerald D. McKnight's 1998 book remains the definitive monograph on the Poor People's Campaign. McKnight argues that the failure of the campaign does not rest solely with Abernathy and the SCLC. Although he acknowledges that the SCLC's leaders botched any chance at generating goodwill from the media and the American public due to the mismanagement of their Resurrection City encampment, McKnight contends that the campaign faced insurmountable obstacles from the beginning. These obstacles included a lack of support from the Johnson White House, the FBI's attempts to undermine the campaign through unlawful surveillance, and miserable weather conditions throughout the length of the encampment.⁹

During her term as president of the Organization of American Historians, Jacquelyn D. Hall implored scholars to produce studies that expand the scope of the civil rights movement. Hall lamented the emergence of a "master narrative" of the civil rights movement, which "begins with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, proceeds through public protests, and culminates with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965." According to Hall, this dominant narrative presents the civil rights movement as a short, triumphal event that occurred exclusively in the South and resulted in the desegregation of public facilities and the extension of voting rights to African Americans. In contrast to this brief and

⁷ Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 129-158.

⁸ Christopher P. Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014), 108; Steve Estes, *Charleston in Black and White: Race and Power in the South after the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 34.

⁹ Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 141-143.

one-dimensional account, Hall argues that a more accurate framework of the black freedom struggle should begin in the 1930s and extend beyond the Voting Rights Act and into the final decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, Hall contends that the “long civil rights movement” featured additional objectives beyond the acquisition of basic citizenship rights for African Americans, such as new opportunities for employment and economic advancement for women and racial minority groups.¹⁰

In the years since Hall presented her argument for a new interpretive framework of the civil rights movement, numerous scholars produced studies that examine the black freedom struggle beyond the 1954-1965 timeframe. Erik S. Gellman examined the National Negro Congress, a militant group of civil rights activists that operated in northern cities during the 1930s. Jason Morgan Ward analyzed the long massive resistance movement to civil rights carried out by white segregationists from the 1930s through 1965 and in a separate study, he argues that America’s “civil rights century” began at the close of World War I when African Americans demanded the same freedom at home that America promoted abroad during the war. Glenda Gilmore traced the origins of civil rights activism to the interwar period in the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹

In addition to the scholarship on the early decades of the long civil rights movement, historians began to expand the timeframe of their studies to include the late 1960s, the entire 1970s, and, in some cases, even the 1980s. Joseph Crespino and Kevin M. Kruse produced

¹⁰ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, 91, 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263.

¹¹ Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow To Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Jason Morgan Ward, *Hanging Bridge: Racial Violence and America’s Civil Rights Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008).

monographs that analyze the rise of conservatism and the New Right as a reaction to federal court decisions of the 1950s and federal civil rights legislation of the 1960s in Mississippi and Atlanta, respectively. Other scholars, such as Cynthia Griggs Fleming and Tomiko Brown-Nagin examined grassroots efforts in the black freedom struggle throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s in rural Alabama and Atlanta, respectively. Likewise, J. Todd Moye's study of the black freedom activists and massive resistance groups in a rural Mississippi county covers a period of four decades, from 1945-1986.¹²

Despite the recent surge of historical scholarship on the decades that preceded and followed the master narrative period, defined by Hall as 1954-1965, few scholars have examined the challenges encountered by the leaders of America's prominent civil rights organizations following the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. robbed the SCLC of its president and left the movement without its symbolic leader, an individual capable of uniting diverse groups, such as middle-class black professionals, white liberals, and members of other civil rights organizations, under the common cause of equality. Ralph David Abernathy inherited the burden of succeeding a genuine icon of the movement just before the launch of SCLC's most ambitious direct-action campaign since the Selma-to-Montgomery Voting Rights March. Moreover, Abernathy's promotion came at a time when America's political landscape began to shift and the election of Richard Nixon signaled a new era, which resulted in a decline in support for civil rights from the White House. Yet many historians chose to focus their studies of the later civil rights era on local movements and

¹² Joseph Crespiño, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); J. Todd Moye, *Let The People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

grassroots organizers instead of analyzing national civil rights leaders such as Abernathy as well as the leaders of emerging organizations such as Jesse Jackson, who broke away from SCLC to form People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), and Coretta Scott King, who sought to commemorate her husband's legacy by establishing a center in his name.

Two recent studies analyze Abernathy's stint as SCLC president after King's death in 1968. Christopher P. Lehman examines Abernathy within the broader framework of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, Lehman's study focuses on the national civil rights organizations during this period and other leaders such as King, as well as other groups such as SNCC, receive a significant amount of analysis in addition to Abernathy. More recently, J. Michael Butler refers to the adversity Abernathy faced as SCLC president during the early 1970s in a study of the black freedom struggle in Escambia County, Florida. Yet Butler's book focuses on the protests and activism of the local affiliates of SCLC and the NAACP and he limits the discussion of Abernathy to the SCLC president's specific interactions with H. K. Matthews, the founder of the organization's Escambia County chapter. By contrast, my study situates Abernathy and SCLC at the forefront of the later years of the civil rights movement.¹³

The history of SCLC and the post-1968 civil rights movement remains incomplete without a thorough examination of Ralph David Abernathy's tenure as the organization's president. Previous studies of the organization's activities either end with King's death or include a brief discussion of Abernathy's stint as a national civil rights leader. This study analyzes Abernathy's presidency and his subsequent campaign for a Congressional seat. From the moment he became SCLC president in the spring of 1968 until the end of his campaign for Congress, Abernathy sought to advance King's goal of eliminating poverty in America. As the events in the ensuing

¹³ Christopher P. Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014); J. Michael Butler, *Beyond Integration: The Black Freedom Struggle in Escambia County, Florida, 1960-1980* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

chapters illustrate, numerous obstacles, including some self-inflicted mistakes, prevented Abernathy from achieving this ambitious goal.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE POOR PEOPLE’S CAMPAIGN

In the summer of 1965, after the Watts riots drew national attention to racism and tensions in Los Angeles, prominent historian C. Vann Woodward analyzed the results of the civil rights movement in an essay published in *The New York Times Magazine*. Woodward lauded the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965:

The result is one of the most impressive achievements in Congressional history. Within the past year, under Administration pressure, Congress has put more teeth in the law and more law on the books than it has in the whole period since 1875. It was as if the first Reconstruction had been endowed with the 14th and 15th Amendments, the Reconstruction Acts, the Freedmen’s Bureau, the Civil Rights Acts and the Ku Klux Klan Act by one session of Congress.¹⁴

Yet the majority of Woodward’s essay featured his thoughts on the future of the civil rights movement after the passage of new federal laws that effectively ended racial discrimination in public accommodations and provided voting rights to African Americans. After describing the various factions within the civil rights community, Woodward foresaw a shift in the objectives and strategies of the movement’s activists during the second half of the 1960s and the dawn of the 1970s. According to Woodward, “In the years ahead, several changes in the movement seem probable. Protest will continue, perhaps intensify, but unless the movement disintegrates in explosions of big-city slum insurrection, the trend will be, as Rustin suggests, from protest to

¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, “After Watts—Where is the Negro Revolution Headed?” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 29, 1965, 104, 289, 338-341.

politics. As civil rights diminish in importance, the shift from status politics to economic politics will increase.”¹⁵

Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), shared his vision for a major protest designed to enhance the economic position of poor people. In the midst of participating in the Meredith Freedom March in June 1966, King and SCLC executive vice-president Ralph David Abernathy visited an elementary school in Marks, Mississippi. The meager food provisions each student received at lunch stunned the two civil rights activists. Abernathy and King witnessed each student receive a few crackers and a quarter slice of an apple for lunch. According to Abernathy, the scene left an indelible impression with King and served as the inspiration for the Poor People’s Campaign, which the SCLC launched two years later. King believed the campaign would shine a spotlight on the conditions of abject poverty that many Americans encountered on a daily basis, “We can’t let that kind of poverty exist in this country. I don’t think people really know that little school children are slowly starving in the United States of America. I didn’t know it.”¹⁶

By the fall of 1967, King began to plan the Poor People’s Campaign. Alarmed by both the shifting trend within the black freedom struggle as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), younger African Americans embracing black power, and race riots in Detroit and Newark, King decided SCLC needed to initiate a direct-action campaign. After settling on setting up a mass encampment of poor people in Washington, D.C., King began to organize what he viewed as perhaps the last best hope to spur the government into enacting meaningful legislation to improve economic conditions for the nation’s poor. In late January

¹⁵ Ibid, 341

¹⁶ Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990) 412-413

1968, Jean M. White described King's mindset in the months preceding the Poor People's Campaign in the *Washington Post*. "As King sees it, a new kind of Selma or Birmingham is needed to dramatize the economic plight of the Negro and compel the Government to act. He also personally needs something dramatic to shore up his leadership among the Negroes if he is to be heard above shouts of black power."¹⁷

Although King and his SCLC aides targeted impoverished African Americans as primary participants in the campaign, they intended to present a diverse and eclectic mosaic of America's poor citizens. According to Andrew Young, one of King's top advisors, the Poor People's Campaign would include poor citizens from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, although African Americans would comprise the bulk of the campaign's 3,000 protesters. King's goals for the campaign consisted of an ambitious set of economic initiatives that he hoped Congress would pass in response to the persistent pressure applied by 3,000 protesters living in a shantytown in the shadow of the Capitol. White suggested King's initial requests of Congress would likely include "a guaranteed income, a \$20 billion-a-year program to help the poor, (and) a \$1000-per-pupil expenditure in ghetto schools."¹⁸

By February 1968, King and his aides drafted a list of demands for Congress, which they deemed necessary to alleviate economic inequality in America. Framing these requests as an "economic and social Bill of Rights," King's list included "Passage of an Emergency Employment Act of the type approved by the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in 1967." King specified that an employment act needed to create at least 250,000 jobs in the public sector, including positions within the fields of "health, public safety, education,

¹⁷ Jean M. White, "King 'Going for Broke' on April Drive for Poor," *Washington Post*, Jan. 28, 1968, A1, A6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

recreation” along with a host of other departments at the municipal, state, and federal levels of government. Other provisions within the proposed Bill of Rights included the addition of the Sub-Employment Index to the Department of Labor’s monthly employment statistics, and a nationwide expansion of Turnkey III, a federal housing project that provided 200 homes for impoverished families near Gulfport, Mississippi. Another request demanded a fund “for an immediate beginning of work on a racially and socially integrated model city for 250,000 citizens and a commitment to build such a city, with requisite federal subsidies, as quickly as possible.”¹⁹

King delegated the planning duties for the Poor People’s Campaign to Bernard Lafayette Jr., a former SNCC field secretary who joined SCLC as the organization’s program director in the fall of 1967. Lafayette’s organizational skills paid immediate dividends during the initial planning phase of the campaign in the early months of 1968. Lafayette persuaded Anthony Henry and William Moyer, two community organizers from the American Friends Service Committee, to lay the foundation of the campaign from the SCLC’s Washington office. As a result, numerous Washington groups publicly supported the campaign, including the Council of Churches of Greater Washington, the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington, the Washington Teachers Union, and the National Association of Social Workers.²⁰

Unbeknownst to King, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover directed his agents to work on undermining the campaign before SCLC and its recruits could arrive in Washington in late April. Officially known as POCAM, the bureau’s crusade against the Poor People’s Campaign involved

¹⁹ First Draft of SCLC message “To the President, Congress, and Supreme Court of the United States,” February 6, 1968, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 10, Folder 2; For more on Turnkey III, see Debbie Z. Harwell, *Wednesdays in Mississippi: Proper Ladies Working for Radical Change, Freedom Summer 1964* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014) 176-178.

²⁰ Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People’s Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998) 25.

local field agents discrediting King's planned demonstration through false rumors of a lack of SCLC funding and a threat of the cancellation of federal welfare checks for any individuals who joined the campaign as participants. Local field offices instructed informants to spread these rumors and warnings throughout the neighborhoods and communities where low-income African American families resided. James A. Harrison, SCLC's comptroller, provided the FBI with extensive knowledge of the organization's plans as a paid informant.²¹

In addition to the FBI's covert efforts to sabotage the campaign, King and SCLC encountered another unforeseen challenge to the Washington demonstration. In February, racial tensions reached a crescendo in Memphis when more than half of the city's predominantly black sanitation workers went on strike. The striking workers demanded better working conditions and the right to unionize. On March 18, just over a month after the strike commenced, King traveled to the city to address the striking workers and their supporters at Mason Temple. King's speech echoed the sentiments of Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., a Memphis-based minister and SNCC veteran, who described the strike to *The New York Times* as "a significant turn in the civil rights movement and a new chapter in labor history. Never before has a union been backed by a whole community like this."²²

Ten days after his address at Mason Temple, King returned to Memphis to lead a march of demonstrators through the city's downtown streets. King's best intentions of leading a nonviolent march of peaceful protesters fell by the wayside when African American youths began to destroy storefront windows and loot local businesses. Memphis police responded by using tear gas, mace, and batons on the rioters. When violence enveloped the march, King and

²¹ Ibid, 23, 25-26

²² Sylvan Fox, "Memphis is Beset By Racial Tension: Garbage Strike Has Become a Major Rights Dispute," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1968, 28; McKnight, 50-52

his aides quickly departed the scene in a vehicle that delivered them to a local motel. Amidst the chaos, Memphis police officer Leslie Dean Jones shot and killed Larry Payne, a 16-year-old African American. Jones contended that he spotted Payne carrying a television near a local department store targeted by looters and pursued the youth into the basement of an apartment. The officer claimed Payne charged at him with butcher knife, which caused him to open fire, killing Payne.²³

As he watched reports of the riot on television in his hotel suite that evening, King worried that he would take the blame for the violent outcome of the march. Unlike some of the prior protests he conducted in Birmingham and Selma, King and his aides did not train the striking Memphis sanitation workers in nonviolent tactics prior to the march. Moreover, King arrived in Memphis an hour after the march's scheduled 10 a.m. start and he joined the in-progress protest. Though it remains unclear whether the rioting African American youths participated in the march from its outset or used the protest as an opportunity to shield authorities from their vandalism, King voiced his displeasure at the unfortunate turn of events to Ralph Abernathy and Bernard Lee. According to Abernathy, a frustrated King proclaimed, "Maybe we'll just have to let violence run its course. Maybe people will listen to the voice of violence. They certainly won't listen to us."²⁴

One day after the Memphis riots King affirmed his commitment to nonviolence. He declared that the upcoming Poor People's Campaign, slated to begin in Washington three weeks later, would take place without the violence that derailed the Memphis march. In a press conference, King admitted that the outbreak of violence caught him off-guard. The SCLC president insisted

²³ Walter Rugaber, "A Negro is Killed in Memphis March," *The New York Times*, March 29, 1968, 1, 29; McKnight, 55-56.

²⁴ Rugaber; Abernathy, 419-420.

that, “If I had known there was a possibility of violence yesterday I would not have had that particular march.” Determined to demonstrate that peaceful protests could take place in Memphis, King vowed to return to the city “as quickly as possible” to lead another march. King added that the encampment planned for the nation’s capital would feature nonviolent protests. Yet he did not issue an assurance that the campaign would take place free of any disturbances. Instead, King explained that “Riots are part of the ugly atmosphere of our society. I cannot guarantee that riots will not take place this summer. I can only guarantee that our demonstrations will not be violent.”²⁵

In contrast to King’s determination to hold nonviolent protests in Memphis and Washington, several politicians expressed their belief that the Memphis riots served as a harbinger to a volatile and unpredictable mass protest in the nation’s capital. Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV) called for the government to seek a court order to prevent King and the SCLC from staging any kind of demonstration. Addressing his concerns about King’s planned campaign a day after the Memphis riots, Byrd remarked, “If this self-seeking rabble-rouser is allowed to go through with his plans here, Washington may well be treated to the same kind of violence, destruction, looting, and bloodshed.” Another conservative Democrat, Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, suggested that King’s protest consist of a small group of individuals who “symbolically” travel to Capitol Hill in order to address their concerns with the plight of the nation’s poor. Stennis thought the government should block any larger constituency of protesters from entering the city. In addition to Byrd and Stennis, Senator Edward Brooke, a Massachusetts Republican and the only African American member of Congress’s upper chamber, also doubted that King and his aides could effectively control protesters. Brooke wondered, “How do you avoid assembling

²⁵ Walter Rugaber, “Dr. King to March in Memphis Again,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 1968, 31.

that many people under the inflammable conditions that exist today where one little spark—some irresponsible kid—could set it off? How do you keep looters out?”²⁶

Another Memphis march presented King with an opportunity to demonstrate that the nonviolent tactics he employed for years could still unite the black community and force lawmakers into improving the lives of African American citizens by passing meaningful legislation. Six weeks before the march, Robert C. Maynard addressed the challenges facing King and SCLC in the *Washington Post*. In an article published under the headline “Is King’s Nonviolence Now Old-Fashioned?” Maynard, a black correspondent, expressed concern over King’s place among black civil rights leaders if the Poor People’s Campaign failed. Maynard posed questions that suggested a harsh reality for King and SCLC if the campaign did not resonate with the American public, “If that happens, what becomes of Martin Luther King? What becomes of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference? Most important, what becomes of the nonviolence that Dr. King, almost alone of the great civil rights leaders of the 1960s, still espouses?” Since the violence that accompanied the Memphis march occurred just six weeks after reporters like Maynard questioned the relevance of King’s nonviolent methods, the SCLC president needed to return to Memphis in order to demonstrate that his organization’s approach remained effective and would work in Washington.²⁷

Yet King understood that the “economic politics” Woodward identified as the new focus of the civil rights movement nearly three years earlier remained the most important objective of his organization, even above a massive nonviolent demonstration in Washington. In a sermon in the city’s National Cathedral on March 31, King acknowledged the possibility of eschewing the Poor

²⁶ Max Frankel, “President Offers U.S. Aid to Cities in Curbing Riots,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 1968, 1 and 30.

²⁷ Robert C. Maynard, “Is King’s Nonviolence Now Old-Fashioned?,” *The Washington Post*, February 11, 1968, C1.

People's Campaign if President Johnson and the U.S. Congress took significant steps toward improving the bleak economic conditions that existed in urban communities across the country. In a news conference following the service, King told the press that, "I would be glad to talk to President Johnson or anyone else. But I wouldn't say that a mere statement that something will be done—just a pat on the back—would cause us to call off the march."²⁸

Instead, King wanted specific details on potential federal aid packages, including dates and procedures for disbursement to potential recipients. According to King, "It would have to be something much more specific—would have to be a commitment with a positive timetable for this summer—for us to call off the march. And I don't see that forthcoming." The SCLC president even suggested that he would move the campaign to the respective political conventions if Johnson and other elected officials ignored the Washington demonstration. King issued a warning to both political parties. "They will have a real awakening in Chicago," he told Ben A. Franklin from *The New York Times*. "That does not mean that the Republicans can feel that they will not experience the same thing at their convention in Miami."²⁹

When King returned to Memphis on April 3, he learned that U.S. District Court Judge Bailey Brown granted a temporary restraining order at the request of Fred Gianotti, Memphis's city attorney. Memphis mayor Henry Loeb instructed Gianotti to seek the restraining order, which barred King from holding any protest march in the city. In the wake of the turmoil that occurred during King's march the previous week, Gianotti argued that another protest march might result in "great damage" in Memphis, where racial tensions remained high in the midst of the sanitation workers' strike. Frustrated with a court order that he viewed as "illegal and unconstitutional,"

²⁸ Ben A. Franklin, "Dr. King Hints He'd Cancel March if Aid is Offered," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1968, 20.

²⁹ Ibid.

King sought to get the ruling overturned as quickly as possible. If his legal team failed to win a reversal of the restraining order, King vowed to violate the ruling. In his comments to the press, King framed the conflict in moral terms, “It will be on the basis of my conscience saying that we have a moral right and responsibility to march.”³⁰

The restraining order postponed King’s march, originally scheduled for Friday April 5, at least until the following Monday. In the meantime, while his lawyers prepared to challenge the restraining order, King returned to the Mason Temple and delivered a stirring public speech. According to Abernathy, King initially decided to skip the appearance due to the strong possibility of a low turnout since afternoon thunderstorms persisted in Memphis throughout the evening hours. Accompanied by Jesse Jackson, Abernathy arrived at the church and saw a crowd of “about five hundred people” and a phalanx of local television cameras. Abernathy called King and persuaded the SCLC president to come to the church and address the surprisingly sizable audience. Following an introduction by Abernathy, King stressed the need to continue using nonviolent procedures in direct-action protests, including marches and economic boycotts. King concluded the speech with an eerie prediction of his own death, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.”³¹

King died the next day, shot by James Earl Ray as King stood on the balcony of his suite at the Lorraine Motel. Two days later, with King’s body housed at a local funeral home, Ralph

³⁰ Earl Caldwell, “Court Bars March in Memphis; Dr. King Calls Order ‘Illegal,’” *The New York Times*, April 4, 1968, 30.

³¹ Abernathy, 430-433.

David Abernathy succeeded Martin Luther King Jr. as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil rights organization the two men helped establish a decade earlier.³²

Three years before King's assassination in Memphis, SCLC revised its bylaws to account for a presidential succession plan in the event that King died while serving as the organization's president. At King's request, the organization officially designated Ralph David Abernathy as his successor immediately following his death. Although Abernathy and King remained virtually inseparable throughout their thirteen-year partnership, several SCLC leaders, including King's father, who served on the organization's board, privately disagreed with the decision. They viewed the decision as King's concession to his friend for years of loyal service and a means to placate Abernathy. Some of the organization's staff members believed that he remained jealous that King, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, did not insist that Abernathy also receive recognition as a co-recipient of the award.³³

As a result of King's death, Abernathy became the president of SCLC, the most prominent civil rights organization in America in 1968. Many Americans, in both the African American and white communities, knew nothing about Ralph David Abernathy. On April 6, *The New York Times* described Abernathy as "calm, slow-talking and very polite," while King "was the leader—eloquent and beloved by the crowds." The profile included basic biographic details on Abernathy and his family along with the origin story of his friendship with King, a relationship that began in the midst of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The newspaper noted the close

³² Abernathy 428, 446-448.

³³ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Quill, 1999) 416-417.

relationship between Abernathy and King, including the fact that many of his associates viewed Abernathy as “Dr. King’s alter ego.”³⁴

Two days later, the *Chicago Defender*, one of the nation’s most influential African American newspapers, published a similar profile of Abernathy. The newspaper informed its readers that Abernathy “marched at King’s side, made tours for him and spoke in his absence when King’s crushing schedule forced him to cancel a speech, but Abernathy’s style kept him in the background.” According to the article, Abernathy “is a gifted speaker, but lacks the oratorical talents King had and the charisma King possessed.” After predicting that Abernathy would likely lean on SCLC’s top officials through the duration of the Poor People’s Campaign, the newspaper concluded that, “He is unlikely to emerge as another Martin Luther King.”³⁵

Born on March 11, 1926, Abernathy spent his childhood on a farm near tiny Linden, Alabama, a rural community in the state’s west central region. At the time of Abernathy’s birth, Linden’s population stood at 700 residents. (According to a 2015 estimate, the current population of Abernathy’s hometown sits at 2,025 residents).³⁶ The tenth of twelve children, Abernathy toiled alongside family members on his father’s farm, a five-hundred acre spread that the elder Abernathy acquired in incremental tracts over many years. Abernathy realized at a young age that he wanted to pursue a career as a clergyman. At the age of seven, Abernathy spent a week attending a revival held at the local Baptist church. Spellbound by the oratory of a Birmingham preacher, Abernathy took the first step toward his future profession by following his mother’s suggestion to pray and fast “until God speaks to you and tells you that you belong to

³⁴ *The New York Times*, “Trusted Successor to Dr. King,” April 6, 1968, 25.

³⁵ *Chicago Defender*, “Abernathy, New Head of Dr. M. King’s SCLC,” April 8, 1968, 18 and 25.

³⁶ 1920 Census population of Linden, Alabama accessed via www.population.us/al/linden; 2015 population estimate of Linden, Alabama accessed via www.census.gov

Him.” Several hours after listening to his mother’s instructions, the young Abernathy experienced a spiritual awakening and established a lifelong connection with God. According to Abernathy, “My sins had been forgiven. I had been reborn.”³⁷

Following a stint in the U.S. Army during the final years of World War II, Abernathy returned to Alabama. Using the money he received from the G.I. Bill, Abernathy enrolled at Alabama State College, a historically black, four-year school located in the state’s capital city of Montgomery. During his college years, Abernathy participated in his first protests. As president of the college’s student council, Abernathy organized a campus-wide hunger strike to protest the striking disparity in food quality between the students’ meals and the entrées reserved for the college’s faculty. While faculty members ate “huge hunks of real ham” for dinner, the dining staff only provided “Spam and unbuttered grits” for students. Midway through the second day of the strike, following four meals which the students skipped, the college’s president, H.C. Trenholm, summoned Abernathy to his office for a meeting. Trenholm assured Abernathy that the quality of meals would improve as soon as the students returned to the dining hall. When the students arrived at the dining hall for dinner that evening, plates of fried chicken awaited them. For Abernathy, the strike provided an unforgettable lesson on confrontations with authority figures, “You can deal with the most awesome authority on an equal basis if the people are on your side.”³⁸

One year after the hunger strike, Abernathy organized another campus protest. In order to meet the housing needs of a male student body that continued to increase with the addition of former servicemen, the college acquired military barracks from nearby Maxwell Air Force Base.

³⁷ Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 4-14

³⁸ Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 64-67.

The male students viewed the older barracks as substandard living facilities due to faulty showers, dilapidated toilets, and an unreliable heating system during the winter months. After listening to the complaints of his fellow residents, Abernathy organized another campus protest. He also scheduled a meeting with Trenholm and Levi Watkins, the man who oversaw the acquisition and upkeep of the on-campus barracks. Accompanied by a group of his peers, Abernathy expressed his concerns with the unsuitable living conditions to Trenholm, who asked Watkins about the validity of the students' depiction of the residential facilities. When Watkins verified the inadequate conditions within the antiquated barracks, Trenholm announced a plan to enhance the college's male residential facilities. Abernathy cited his two meetings with Trenholm as pivotal moments for the challenges he led as a civil rights leader in the decades that followed his college years. According to Abernathy,

The victories I won were relatively small, but their importance to my own self-confidence cannot be overestimated. I believe that my later dealings with mayors, governors, and presidents were significantly facilitated by these two meetings in Dr. Trenholm's office. As a matter of fact, no man ever intimidated me in the same way that Dr. Trenholm did; and when I met Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush they somehow seemed lesser men than this stern black scholar, with his regal bearing and his steady, dispassionate gaze.³⁹

After graduating from Alabama State in 1950, Abernathy resisted the urge to pursue a full-time career as pastor. Instead, he moved to Atlanta and enrolled in graduate school at Atlanta University. During his years in graduate school, Abernathy encountered Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time. Following his first year in graduate school at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, King returned to Atlanta and served as a guest preacher at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his father presided as pastor. One Sunday, Abernathy decided to attend a

³⁹ Ibid, 83-85.

service at the church in order to observe the young preacher that a fellow classmate told him about. Abernathy recognized the preternatural oratorical skills possessed by King, “Already he was a scholar; and while he didn’t holler as loud as some of the more famous preachers I had heard, he could holler loud enough when he wanted to. Even then I could tell that he was a man with a special gift from God.” As he exited the church, Abernathy greeted King in the receiving line, introduced himself, and commended the guest preacher on his sermon.⁴⁰

Several days later, the two men met again at a choir recital on the campus of Spelman College. Unbeknownst to King, Abernathy recognized his date, who previously feigned an illness to get out of attending the event with him. A few years later, Abernathy recounted the story to King who had traveled to Montgomery to audition for the open pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. With both men happily married to other women by then, they shared a hearty laugh.⁴¹

By 1954, both King and Abernathy held pastorates at prominent churches in Montgomery. At the age of twenty-six, Abernathy accepted the pulpit at First Baptist Church in the summer of 1952. The 25-year-old King succeeded Vernon Johns as the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in the fall of 1954. On December 1, 1955, just over a year after King arrived in Montgomery, Rosa Parks, a seamstress and secretary of the city’s NAACP chapter, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a city bus. Following her arrest, Parks told E.D. Nixon, a prominent black union leader in Montgomery, and Clifford Durr, a white lawyer, that she would challenge the arrest in an effort to strike down the city’s segregation law. Within a week, a group of the city’s African American leaders, including Nixon, Abernathy, and King organized

⁴⁰ Abernathy, 89.

⁴¹ Abernathy, 89-91; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) 107-108.

a boycott of the city's bus system. On December 5, the group held a meeting to create an organization to coordinate the bus boycott. The group chose King to lead the new Montgomery Improvement Association and Abernathy agreed to serve as the organization's program chairman.⁴²

Neither King nor Abernathy anticipated that the boycott would last for 381 days or that it would change the course of their professional careers. At the time, both men sought to establish their careers as Baptist pastors and while they recognized the need to serve as leaders of Montgomery's black community, neither man realized the effect of the boycott on their own lives. Three decades after the boycott occurred, Abernathy reflected on the conflict it presented to the two young preachers, "Neither one of us believed he was ready to lead a national crusade. Martin wanted a few more years of experience in the pulpit. I wanted a Ph.D. Both of us believed that because we were still in our twenties, we did not have the maturity necessary to confront the formidable white leadership arrayed against us in every state capitol and county courthouse in the South."⁴³

Yet the success of the boycott, which ended December 20, 1956 when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the ruling of a federal court ruling that declared the city's segregated bus ordinances unconstitutional, catapulted King into the national spotlight as an effective civil rights activist. Within two months of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Browder v. Gayle*, King and Abernathy, along with several other leading African American preachers, including C.K. Steele of Tallahassee, Theodore J. Jemison of Baton Rouge, and A.L. Davis of New Orleans, created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. On the heels of his successful stint leading the

⁴² Branch, 120-121, 130-131; Abernathy, 146-148.

⁴³ Abernathy, 169-170.

Montgomery Improvement Association, King agreed to serve as the organization's first president. The group chose Abernathy as the organization's treasurer.⁴⁴

Together, the two men collaborated on a relentless campaign to end segregation in the South and enhance economic opportunities for poor African Americans throughout the nation. Their activism spanned thirteen years, countless jail cells, and included landmark victories in Birmingham and Selma as well as frustrating defeats in Albany and Chicago. King's death in Memphis thrust Abernathy into the spotlight to carry on the grand plans of his closest friend's final attempt to improve the lives of America's poor citizens.

Two weeks after King's death, Abernathy announced that SCLC planned to launch the Poor People's Campaign on April 29. Addressing the media at a news conference in Atlanta, Abernathy described the organization's intent to stage "the most militant and aggressive nonviolent war ever waged by the human and civil rights movement in this country." Abernathy outlined the SCLC's objective to "lead waves of American poor people to Washington," and he vowed that "we will stay there, engaging in militant nonviolent action, until the Congress deals with the issue of poverty and racism in the United States." According to Abernathy, the campaign would unfold in two stages. The campaign would kick off with a delegation of 100 individuals traveling to Washington on April 29 in order to meet with politicians and government officials. Slated to begin on May 2, the second stage would begin with a ceremony honoring King's memory at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis and continue with a march to the nation's capital.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Garrow, 89-90.

⁴⁵ Earl Caldwell, "Abernathy Pledges 'Militant' Drive for the Poor," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1968, 21.

In addition to honoring King's memory, the decision to proceed with the Poor People's Campaign provided the SCLC with an opportunity to raise money and awareness regarding poverty in America. King's death generated a wave of donations to SCLC and the organization's leaders believed the campaign would inspire more donors to pledge gifts to fund their work. According to Hosea Williams, one of the campaign's regional coordinators, the assassination of King caused donors who previously rebuffed the organization's request for financial support to reconsider: "Elements that were dead set against us are now prone to be more cooperative. We find ourselves in a new position, and we hope we can make the best of it." As a result, the Memphis march served as a prelude to the Poor People's Campaign, a much larger demonstration with more ambitious goals than the resolution of a municipal sanitation workers' strike. On April 27, two days before the scheduled launch of the campaign, the *Chicago Defender* outlined the stakes of the campaign for its readers, "Thus, the nation is in for a considerable period of protest this spring—which is likely either to spur anti-poverty measures or end in rioting, as one of the Memphis demonstrations did. What would come of the protests depends largely on what control is maintained by SCLC over them."⁴⁶

As Abernathy and his SCLC colleagues prepared for an indefinite encampment in Washington, opponents of the campaign spoke out against the pending demonstration. Senator Russell Long (D-LA) vowed that he would demand the censure or expulsion of any member of Congress who supported "bending the knee" to accommodate the requests of the campaign's leaders. Long suggested a relocation of the capital if local and federal authorities permitted the demonstrations to occur in Washington: "When that bunch of marchers comes here, they can just burn the whole place down and we can just move the capital to some place where they enforce

⁴⁶ *Chicago Defender*, "'Poor People's March' Is Big Challenge For Abernathy," April 27, 1968, 7.

the law.” In addition to Long, Dr. Thomas W. Matthew, a prominent black businessman, announced his opposition to the guaranteed income provisions sought by the campaign’s leaders. According to Matthew, “Our grandparents had a guaranteed annual income. They called it slavery. We should know better.” As an alternative, Matthew proposed a ten-year self-help economic development program that would consist of a combination of public and private loans, including \$100 million in annual federal loans at two percent interest, 20-year private loans at four percent interest, and loans from foreign investors at six percent interest over five years.⁴⁷

On April 29, Abernathy led a group of approximately 150 individuals into Washington to launch the Poor People’s Campaign. Abernathy engaged in a series of discussions with a range of Cabinet officials from the Johnson White House, including Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman, Attorney General Ramsay Clark, and Labor Secretary W. Willard Wertz. During the meetings, Abernathy expressed a set of SCLC’s concerns regarding the obstacles faced by the nation’s poor. Abernathy issued the following request to Wertz, “We ask you to eliminate programs that try to fit poor people to a system that has systematically excluded them from sharing in America’s plenty. We say that the system must change and adjust to the needs of millions who are unemployed or under-employed.” The group presented a statement in their meeting with Clark that outlined their frustration with the relationship between the poor and law enforcement agencies claiming, “Justice is not a reality for the black, Mexican-American, Indian and Puerto Rican poor.” The statement cited an increasing wave of discrimination in multiple

⁴⁷ “Russell Long Hits March of the Poor,” Associated Press brief, *The New York Times*, April 26, 1968, 15; “Self-Help Loans Urged By Negro,” Associated Press brief, *The New York Times*, April 28, 1968, 33.

areas, including housing, education, and employment, as contributing factors to the distrust between poor citizens and law enforcement officials.⁴⁸

Abernathy and his delegation of his supporters came away from their meetings encouraged with the Johnson Administration's willingness to listen to their grievances about the nation's failure to provide adequate opportunities for its poor citizens to escape poverty. Yet the group remained firm in their demands, particularly their primary stipulation of jobs for every able-bodied citizen and a guaranteed income for individuals who lacked the minimum capabilities for employment. Abernathy assured reporters that "we'll be back in 10 days for some answers," from federal government officials.⁴⁹

Returning to the scene of King's death, Abernathy officially launched the Poor People's Campaign on May 2 with a ceremony in Memphis at the balcony of the Lorraine Motel suite where King died nearly a month earlier. The SCLC president marked the transition between the mourning of King's death and the beginning of the campaign that had consumed the final months of his life, "The moment has come. The days of weeping are ended. The days of march have begun." Following the ceremony, eight busloads of African American supporters traveled from Memphis to Marks, Mississippi, the site of King's confrontation with the abject poverty that black schoolchildren encountered on a daily basis at lunchtime two years earlier. Noting the numerous logistical changes involving lodging—SCLC officials split the delegation of marchers into separate groups with "about 300" spending the night in Marks and the remainder returning

⁴⁸ Earl Caldwell, "Campaign of Poor Begins in Capital," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1968, 1, 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

to Memphis—the Associated Press characterized the campaign’s launch as a “confused opening day.”⁵⁰

Shortly after Abernathy and the campaign’s participants began their caravan to Washington from Memphis and the Mississippi Delta, Lyndon Johnson spoke publicly about the massive demonstration that would eventually occur in the nation’s capital. One day after the campaign launched, Johnson expressed his hope that the protesters allow Congress and the federal government the opportunity to address any grievances they brought forth upon their arrival in the nation’s capital. Since Abernathy echoed King’s promise of remaining encamped with supporters in Washington for the duration of the summer if necessary, Johnson urged that the demonstrators should step back and let the government work instead of engaging in an indefinite demonstration. In Johnson’s view, “We do expect that the poor will be better served if, after that viewpoint is presented, that the Congress and the appropriate administrative agencies can have the time to try to act upon it and execute it.”⁵¹

Despite the logistical missteps that hampered the campaign’s first day, the caravan began to gain momentum by the end of its opening week. On May 6, a group of “nearly one thousand Negroes” marched through Selma, Alabama, site of a brutal attack on civil rights demonstrators during a 1965 march in support of the Voting Rights Act. Abernathy led the marchers through downtown Selma where demonstrators paused to remember fallen civil rights activists by placing memorial wreaths around the city.⁵² Following an overnight stay, Abernathy led the caravan of 300 demonstrators from Selma to Montgomery. As the group reached the outskirts of Alabama’s

⁵⁰ “March for the Poor Has a Confused First Day,” Associated Press report, *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1968, 1.

⁵¹ Ben A. Franklin, “President Voices Concern on March,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 1968, 1, 17.

⁵² Earl Caldwell, “Poor March Into Montgomery, 2,000 Following Rights Leader,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 1968, 31.

capitol city, a large contingent of supporters joined for the march through Montgomery's downtown streets. According to an account of the Selma-to-Montgomery leg of the caravan in *The New York Times*, a crowd of "some 2,000 persons were walking along behind Mr. Abernathy" by the time the march ended in the city's "predominantly Negro west side."⁵³

Three days after the Montgomery portion of the caravan, the SCLC received a permit from the National Park Service to build a temporary encampment in Washington D.C., in a section of West Potomac Park, located near the Lincoln Memorial. With Abernathy still leading the caravan in the Deep South, Lafayette, the SCLC program director, addressed the news media at a press conference on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The permit allowed a group of 3,000 activists to reside in the encampment from May 11 until 8 p.m. on June 16. In addition, the permit could be renewed if necessary. At the press conference, Lafayette declared that "We are here to stay and to conduct our campaign until our demands are met."⁵⁴

When the caravan reached Atlanta, King's hometown and the headquarters of the SCLC, Abernathy delivered a passionate speech at the Butler Street YMCA's Hunger Club tribute to King on May 8. In a nearly hour-long address, Abernathy promised to continue King's mission of eliminating poverty in America. Vowing to serve "as the same kind of troublemaker as Martin Luther King," Abernathy declared that, "If we can spend billions to send a man to the moon, we can spend billions to stand a man on his feet." The SCLC president added that poor people "aren't begging for charity, we are demanding civilized justice. We are not asking for favors, we are talking about equality." Like his predecessor, Abernathy realized the stakes involved with the Poor People's Campaign. He told the nearly 400 attendees that the campaign

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ben A. Franklin, "U.S. Issues Permit to March of Poor," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1968, 33.

might represent the “last attempt anybody is going to make to deal with these problems peacefully.”⁵⁵

Abernathy’s remarks resonated with the interracial crowd at the Hunger Club tribute. Audience applause interrupted Abernathy sixteen times during his speech.⁵⁶ Despite a few logistical glitches, the early weeks of the Poor People’s Campaign, beginning with the launch of the caravan in Marks, resulted in favorable media coverage for Abernathy and the SCLC. As Gerald McKnight notes, “The national press, including some large southern dailies, the three major television networks, and Britain’s BBC, recognized good copy when they saw it, giving the mule train broad and sustained coverage.” Abernathy and Hosea Williams rode in the lead wagon, driven by mules who received the derisive monikers “Stennis” and “Eastland,” after Mississippi’s two segregationist senators. In front of crowds of supporters and members of the news media, the two SCLC leaders often joked about the origin of the mules’ monikers.⁵⁷

Within a week of his address at the Butler Street YMCA, Abernathy arrived in Washington to open Resurrection City, the encampment where campaign demonstrators would reside during the campaign. On May 13, Abernathy “drove a ceremonial nail” into the stake of the first of hundreds of plywood shelters erected to house campaign participants. The SCLC president informed reporters that the campaign would last “until the Congress of the United States decide that they are going to do something about the plight of the poor people by doing away with poverty, unemployment and underemployment in this country.” Before hammering away at the ceremonial nail, Abernathy asked a young Native American woman from the Creek Nation of

⁵⁵ Alex Coffin, “Abernathy Vows to Press Fight Begun by Dr. King,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 9, 1968, 1, 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ McKnight, 96-97.

Oklahoma for permission to “use this land.” After she granted “permission,” Abernathy christened the encampment “Resurrection City, U.S.A.”⁵⁸

With the launch of the Poor People’s Campaign and the construction of Resurrection City complete, the focus of the campaign shifted toward meetings with government officials, life in the encampment, and Abernathy’s performance in his first significant leadership opportunity as SCLC president. Two days after the opening of Resurrection City, Abernathy met with a large delegation of Congress—seven senators and 65 representatives—on Capitol Hill to discuss the goals of the campaign. He reassured the elected officials that the campaign’s demonstrations would remain peaceful and “disruptions of the government” would only occur “as a last resort” in the event that negotiations failed.

While Abernathy met with congressional leaders to promote the campaign, he remained the focus of reporters who speculated about how he would lead this large-scale project designed by his predecessor. Thrust into the most prominent leadership position among the nation’s civil rights organizations just five weeks before the opening of Resurrection City, Abernathy went from serving as a loyal acolyte at King’s side to the face of SCLC just as the organization launched its most ambitious direct-action campaign since Selma. With thousands of demonstrators descending on Washington to participate in the campaign, reporters and politicians wondered how Abernathy would fare as the leader of an ambitious campaign devised by his iconic predecessor. On May 18, the *Chicago Defender* published a UPI story in which three of the wire service’s reporters “pool their impressions in the following team report on the little-known but suddenly powerful man who emerged from obscurity to succeed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” The article provided readers with basic biographical details about Abernathy

⁵⁸ Ben A. Franklin, “‘City’ of the Poor Begun in Capital,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1968, 1, 26.

and his relationship with King. According to one civil rights activist “who worked closely” with both men, “Without Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King would have been something entirely different than he was. Ralph was a doer, the glue that held SCLC together. When Martin got discouraged it was Ralph who kept him going.”⁵⁹

Henry P. Leifermann, a UPI reporter who covered both King and Abernathy, acknowledged that SCLC would likely remain committed to nonviolent demonstrations with Abernathy as president of the organization. Yet Leifermann also posited that the organization would become “much more black-oriented” and “dominated by the style of the rural Southern Baptist preacher” embodied by Abernathy. With the public demonstration phase of the Poor People’s Campaign set to begin the following week, Louis Cassels alluded to the possibility of a showdown between Abernathy and Lyndon Johnson if the campaign persisted beyond the end of May. As Cassels noted, “At this point, no one—including Ralph Abernathy and Lyndon Johnson—can be sure what’s ahead.” Cassels included a quote from Abernathy to illustrate the SCLC’s commitment to continue the campaign until Congress met the organization’s demands, “Congress has never done anything for Negroes or poor people except in response to pressure. We cannot afford to relent for America’s sake as well as our own. If this non-violent campaign fails, it will bring out the more militant groups who are just waiting for us to fail. They’re the ones who want to burn down the country.”⁶⁰

Although the Poor People’s Campaign began with great fanfare in late May 1968, problems surfaced almost as soon as the protest portion of the campaign began. On May 20, Abernathy announced the possibility of a postponement of Solidarity Day, the showcase event of the

⁵⁹ Louis Cassels, “Find Abernathy Strongly Devoted to Black People’s Cause,” *Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1968, 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

campaign, from May 30 to a later date to provide additional time for organizers. In addition to a potential rescheduling of the campaign's biggest event, tension between Resurrection City residents and the press began to surface during the campaign's opening week. Several of the city's marshals attempted to bar members of the news media from entering the encampment. One marshal threatened a group of cameramen to leave unless they wanted to register to participate as city residents. If the cameramen failed to heed his warning, the marshal vowed to "cut one of you" with a razorblade.⁶¹

Although an SCLC staffer quickly overruled the marshals and allowed journalists to enter the city, the incident represented an early example of the struggle between SCLC organizers and Resurrection City marshals, some of whom engaged in acts of violence against city residents during their daily patrols of the encampment. Years later, Abernathy characterized the unruly marshals as "an angry gang" of young black men from Chicago and Detroit who abused their position within the encampment. Abernathy explained that, "To cope with them, we tried to use psychology and made a few of the leaders 'marshals,' though the only people who really needed disciplining were their own ranks. But the stratagem didn't work. They continued to cause trouble, particularly at night when others were settling down and attempting to go to sleep. So we had to ship them back home. Unfortunately, we did not locate them all and they made trouble until the day we left."⁶²

The marshals' harassment of reporters on the city's opening day stunned many journalists who received favorable treatment from the SCLC during previous direct-action demonstrations. As Gerald McKnight notes, the marshals' hostile behavior toward reporters put an unnecessary

⁶¹ Paul Valentine, "Abernathy Set To Start Protests," *Washington Post*, May 21, 1968, A1, A8.

⁶² Abernathy, 514-15.

strain on the relationship between the SCLC and a potentially powerful ally, “Most of the reporters assigned to the campaign were sympathetic to its goals and were shocked and mystified by strong-arm tactics that interfered with their efforts to get the story and meet their deadlines.”⁶³

In addition to the marshals’ volatile behavior toward the press and other Resurrection City residents, an unforeseen problem arose within the encampment in the form of inclement weather. Torrential downpours doused the encampment throughout the first full week, which resulted in muddy conditions resembling a swamp rather than a makeshift residential city. Heavy rain on May 23 and consistent precipitation the next day forced a temporary evacuation of “about 100 to 150” residents due to the resulting damages to their plywood homes. On a mission to determine “the feasibility of donating heating units to cook food in the city’s kitchen,” Pat Brown, a former California governor, viewed the mud-covered community and recommended a full evacuation of the site.⁶⁴ In his autobiography, Abernathy reflected on how the rain hindered Resurrection City and the campaign throughout the encampment’s six-week existence, “It was one of the wettest springs in the history of the nation’s capital. Day after day, the gray skies poured water, huge sheets that swept across the mall like the monsoons of India. The first day or two, it was an adventure, sitting in the City Hall tent, listening to the persistent rapping of raindrops on the canvas. But after a week the green grass that had provided us with a natural carpeting sank under our feet into soft mud.”⁶⁵ Still, despite the unpleasant weather conditions, Resurrection City’s physical size combined with the tension that permeated the entire encampment remain fresh in the mind of Eddie Lee Webster Jr., a 16-year-old who traveled from his hometown of Marks, Mississippi on the mule train to participate in the campaign. Reflecting on the

⁶³ McKnight, 114.

⁶⁴ Paul W. Valentine and Willard Clopton Jr., “Marchers Stay Despite Mud,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 1968, A1, A4.

⁶⁵ Abernathy, 517.

atmosphere at Resurrection City, Webster remarked that, “It was humongous and you had National Guard, state troopers and all. Then, you had to be careful because you didn’t know...you walk outside Resurrection City, they might beat you and take you on to jail.”⁶⁶

While rain wreaked havoc on Resurrection City, Abernathy met with Bayard Rustin in New York to plan Solidarity Day. Rustin organized the 1963 March on Washington in which an estimated 250,000 people filled the Washington Mall and listened to a variety of speakers, including King, who delivered his legendary “I Have A Dream,” address. Beyond meeting Rustin in New York, Abernathy and other SCLC staffers stayed at the Pitts Motel at the start of the campaign, which rankled residents of Resurrection City forced to cope with the constant rain and thick mud.⁶⁷

Yet the campaign suffered from problems that went beyond an unpredictable stretch of adverse weather. A combination of confusion and dissension among SCLC’s leaders plagued the campaign throughout the first three weeks of Resurrection City. For example, on May 31, less than two weeks after the protest phase of the campaign began, SCLC executive director Andrew Young announced the reassignment of Jesse Jackson from manager of Resurrection City to a new fundraising role in Chicago. Hosea Williams took over Jackson’s old position of “city manager.” Although Young described the personnel change as a simple “shifting of gears,” reporters perceived the move as a demotion for Jackson, the subject of a favorable profile in *The New York Times* just a week before his departure.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Eddie Lee Webster Jr., interview by Chet Bush, *Mississippi Stories*, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, the University of Mississippi, <http://mississippistories.org/story/a-story-of-the-poor-peoples-campaign-mule-train/>, March 19, 2016.

⁶⁷ McKnight, 119.

⁶⁸ Earl Caldwell, “New Chief Named To Spur Campaign of Poor in Capital,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1968, 1, 28; *The New York Times*, “Emerging Rights Leader: Jesse Lewis Jackson,” May 24, 1968, 30.

Within a week of Jackson's exit from Washington, Bayard Rustin issued an ultimatum to Abernathy. Speaking to reporters in New York on June 6, Rustin announced that, "Unless by noon tomorrow, negotiations begin to give me complete authority, then I'm out." Rustin's frustration resulted from a dispute over the goals of the campaign. In preparation for the Solidarity Day demonstration, Rustin issued a 14-point list of demands from SCLC to convey the organization's goals for the campaign to Congress. After Rustin issued his request through a statement on June 3, Williams labeled it "a lot of foolishness" and declared that the veteran civil rights organizer had "no business" releasing the statement.⁶⁹ Rustin opted to appeal to Abernathy in attempt to clarify that he possessed total control over the planning and execution of Solidarity Day. Without an assurance from Abernathy, Rustin claimed that he could not recruit the individuals and groups he needed to participate in the demonstration.⁷⁰

One day later, Rustin quit the campaign when Abernathy declined to provide him with the authority he sought. Abernathy described the philosophical differences between SCLC officials and Rustin as "a minor misunderstanding over goals" and he insisted that, "There is no rift between us and there is not going to be any." Rustin also declined to publicly criticize Abernathy or SCLC. "Rev. Abernathy has not asked me to resign. If my resignation can dispel discord that is harmful to our cause, I feel completely gratified." According to Abernathy, Rustin's list did not include several of the campaign objectives, including a demand for the end of American involvement in the Vietnam War.⁷¹

While Abernathy contended that Rustin's resignation represented a minor setback due to a slight disagreement between the organizer and SCLC's staff, reporters characterized the loss of

⁶⁹ Willard Clopton Jr., "Rustin Sets Deadline On March Role," *Washington Post*, June 7, 1968, A1, A23.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Willard Clopton Jr., "Rustin Quits March; Tucker New Choice," *Washington Post*, June 8, 1968, A1, A4.

Rustin as a major blow to the Solidarity Day march and the overall campaign. Two days after Rustin's resignation, Jean M. White reported "without Rustin there are fears that the June 19 rally might end in a whimper." According to White, SCLC balked at Rustin's request of authority and his attempt to "define their vague demands into what he considers realistic goals." As a result, Abernathy's decision revealed "SCLC, jealous of its ownership of the dream of Martin Luther King, has made it clear that it wants to keep full control of the Poor People's Campaign."⁷²

Ben A. Franklin echoed White's sentiments in *The New York Times*. Franklin asserted that, "Without Rustin, the June 19 march seems certain to fail, or at least to become something altogether different from the planned day when 'the non-poor and the middle class do their thing,' as S.C.L.C. officials used to call it." Franklin viewed the stubborn refusal of militant SCLC staffers to embrace "Rustin's brand of old-line, respectable, highly organized, labor, church and academic liberalism" for the march as a gaffe with the potential to undermine the entire campaign. He contended: "The outlook immediately grew dimmer both for the future of the Abernathy-King kind of nonviolent protest in general and for the Poor People's campaign in particular."⁷³

When Ralph David Abernathy delivered his speech to conclude the Solidarity Day demonstration on June 19, only about twenty percent of the march's estimated 50,000 participants remained at the Washington Mall to hear his message. Abernathy struck a defiant tone in his address as he proclaimed "We will not bow down to a racist Congress. We will not bow down to an Administration that refuses to administrate to the nation the blessings of the

⁷² Jean M. White, "Leadership Crisis Perils Poor March," *Washington Post*, June 9, 1968, A1, A22.

⁷³ Ben A. Franklin, "The Poor: Campaign In Trouble," *The New York Times*, June 9, 1968, E5.

poor. We will not bow down to the militarism and violence of this nation. I don't care what they do to me. If I must join Robert Kennedy and Martin King, I still will not bow." He also referenced the 1963 March on Washington and characterized the civil rights legislation passed in the years between the two demonstrations as "broken promises."⁷⁴

Abernathy's speech capped an eventful day, which began with a one-mile march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and featured speeches by a host of civil and human rights leaders including NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins, UAW president Walter Reuther, National Urban League executive director Whitney Young and King's widow, Coretta Scott King. Given the fact that Solidarity Day took place in the same venue as the 1963 march and both demonstrations featured keynote addresses by SCLC's president, many reporters and columnists offered comparisons regarding the two protests. In addition to describing the smaller crowd size, journalists noted that the Solidarity Day participants conveyed a different mood than the hopeful spirit that underscored the earlier demonstration. One NAACP official remarked that the casual attire worn by many marchers symbolized their anger and frustration with the economic and social inequality present throughout America: "Five years ago this thing was almost solidly middle class, and even the poor dressed their Sunday best. Yet the country has failed to change, and there is disenchantment which affects them in so many ways."⁷⁵

William Raspberry, a black columnist with the *Washington Post*, declared that, "by the standard set on Aug. 28, 1963, Wednesday's Solidarity Day affair was a pale thing." Raspberry noted the differences in behavior between the crowds at the two demonstrations, which he

⁷⁴ Ben A. Franklin, "Protesters Call for Sharing of Nation's Affluence by All," *The New York Times*, June 20, 1968, 1, 30.

⁷⁵ Robert B. Semple Jr., "Mood of the Marchers: Patience Worn Thin and a Feeling This is The Last Chance," *The New York Times*, June 20, 1968, 31.

viewed as a shift in mindset that occurred in the five-year gap between the protests. According to Raspberry, “There were little things, like people not being quite as polite as they were five years ago when you could step on somebody’s foot and he’d smile and say, ‘Excuse me, please.’ But mainly it was the mood of 1963 that was gone, and as a result, the endless speeches and songs and prayers, as good as some of them were, were little more than an all-day bore.” Raspberry did not blame Abernathy or Sterling Tucker, Rustin’s replacement as Solidarity Day coordinator, for what he viewed as a lackluster demonstration. Instead, he depicted the demonstration as a microcosm of the entire campaign, “Nothing in particular went wrong Wednesday; it’s just that nothing happened. Everybody *knew* nothing would happen, and everybody was powerless to do anything about it.”⁷⁶

On June 24, 1968, less than a week after Solidarity Day, the remaining residents of Resurrection City departed the encampment at the insistence of local police officers, who arrived to oversee the evacuation of the residential community following the expiration of SCLC’s permit the previous evening. Police arrested Abernathy at the U.S. Capitol, where he marched along with close to three hundred followers to protest the closing of Resurrection City. As the final residents vacated the encampment under the supervision of local police officers, Young conceded that the challenge of operating a makeshift residential community consisting of a diverse group of poor Americans took the focus away from the issues SCLC officials attempted to illuminate during the six-week campaign. According to Young, “We got too bogged down in Resurrection City and wasted a lot of energy here. In one sense, whoever it was that ran us out of there maybe did us a real favor.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ William Raspberry, “March Lacked 1963’s Mood,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1968, B1.

⁷⁷ Joseph A. Loftus, “City of the Poor Shuts Peacefully,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 1968, 29.

While Young expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment at the conclusion of the Poor People's Campaign and journalists such as William Raspberry lamented the fact that "nothing happened" on Solidarity Day, Eddie Lee Webster Jr. believes the unity displayed by the crowd mattered as much as the campaign's tangible goals. According to Webster, singing along with the crowd delivered a powerful message of camaraderie that underscored the goals of the ordinary people that participated in the campaign, "That was the whole movement, you know. The song and what the words say, that was [what] the whole march was about. It wasn't about just being poor or whatever. It was about standing up and not letting nobody turn you around or whatever. It was about the will to accomplish something and that's what most people liked about it."⁷⁸

The Poor People's Campaign exposed the weaknesses of SCLC and foreshadowed the struggles that Abernathy and the organization would encounter in the ensuing decade. The dissension among the organization's leaders did not disappear after the conclusion of the campaign. Jesse Jackson continued to create problems for Abernathy and SCLC's board of directors in his role as director of Operation Breadbasket, the organization's economic and fundraising arm, before he resigned in a public split at the end of 1971. As Solidarity Day demonstrated, the use of nonviolent protest, which worked well in desegregation campaigns during the 1960s, proved ineffective in combating the more complex issue of economic inequality in the 1970s. Hence, civil rights activists such as Young opted to pursue public office because they believed politics represented the most effective method of utilizing nonviolence to enact meaningful social and economic change. King told Abernathy that "you are the only one

⁷⁸ Eddie Lee Webster Jr., interview by Chet Bush, *Mississippi Stories*, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, the University of Mississippi, <http://mississippistories.org/story/a-story-of-the-poor-peoples-campaign-mule-train/>, March 19, 2016.

who could keep the team together,” in the event of his death. However, the team remained loyal to King, despite the fact that Abernathy pushed for the same goals King outlined for the campaign.⁷⁹

Furthermore, as historian Nick Kotz observed, in the months preceding his death, King displayed public contempt for Lyndon Johnson, which resulted in an open feud between the two men. A fundamental disagreement over the fate of antipoverty programs drove a wedge between the men who worked together just a few years earlier on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. King believed Johnson should withdraw American troops from Vietnam and increase federal funding for social programs designed to help the poor. As a lame-duck president with declining approval ratings, Johnson had little incentive to work with Abernathy, King’s closest associate and hand-picked successor.⁸⁰

Of course, Abernathy also committed some major mistakes during the campaign. The inability to compromise with Rustin and keep him onboard damaged the credibility of the campaign in the eyes of the press before Solidarity Day took place. Moreover, the fact that Solidarity Day failed to resonate with federal government officials and journalists indicated that the SCLC needed to revamp its strategy of spurring the government into passing legislation to assist impoverished Americans. As Raspberry observed in his analysis of Solidarity Day, “What Wednesday taught us, perhaps, is that the day of the demonstration as an effective civil rights tool is over, that there can never be another Aug. 28, 1963.”⁸¹ Yet Abernathy and his SCLC staff continued to engage in nonviolent demonstrations for years to come

⁷⁹ Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 475-478.

⁸⁰ Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws that Changed America* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006), 380-384.

⁸¹ Raspberry, “March Lacked 1963’s Mood,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1968, B1.

CHAPTER TWO:
**RALPH DAVID ABERNATHY, SCLC, AND THE CHARLESTON HOSPITAL
WORKERS' STRIKE**

On April 26, 1969, Ralph David Abernathy composed a letter from his cell in the Charleston County Jail. A year removed from his ascension to the presidency of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Abernathy borrowed a tactic his predecessor employed in Birmingham six years earlier. The letter served as Abernathy's response to a paid advertisement in the *Charleston News and Courier* in which a group of 59 citizens urged the Concerned Clergy Committee to withdraw its support of the black hospital workers' strike against the Medical College of South Carolina (MCH) and the Charleston County Hospital. In addition to refuting several of the group's assertions against the strikers, Abernathy outlined the strikers' goal: "We will teach until South Carolina recognizes the rights of its poor to organize and accept Local 1199B as the official bargaining agent for the non-professional workers in Charleston's county and University Hospitals."⁸²

By the late 1960s, a significant shift had occurred in the objectives of SCLC. Following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the organization set its sights on improving the economic conditions of African Americans in urban communities. When King arrived in Chicago in 1966 to lead a campaign aimed at narrowing the income gap between the city's black residents and their white counterparts, SCLC's senior staff members

⁸² Ralph David Abernathy, "A Letter from the Charleston County Jail," April 26, 1969, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 343, Folder 1.

quickly realized that poverty represented the next obstacle facing African Americans in their quest for equality.

Abernathy recalled encountering the stark reality of this challenge during an early visit to Chicago with King, “By this time we realized that although we had won the legal right to check into any hotel in the country, we still had problems checking out, because we didn’t have the money to pay. In large measure that was the problem with the blacks living in Chicago. They didn’t have the money to buy their way out of the squalor and degradation that surrounded them.”⁸³ By December 1967, King began to plan a Poor People’s Campaign with the intent of generating awareness of the millions of Americans living in poverty. King hired Bernard Lafayette, a founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to the position of program director for the SCLC and instructed him to begin organizing the venture.⁸⁴ The assassination of King in the spring of 1968 thrust Abernathy into the spotlight as the new SCLC president.

In the wake of the Resurrection City failure, Andrew Young, the SCLC’s executive vice president, sought to rectify the growing friction within the organization’s senior staff by scheduling a multi-day meeting in which a pair of psychiatrists observed and analyzed the issues of contention.⁸⁵ Although the group therapy session helped clear the air among SCLC’s top officials, the organization still lacked consensus on leadership and direction. King’s death robbed SCLC of the dynamic personality capable of convincing staff members to put aside their individual interests for the good of the organization. Unlike King, none of the remaining senior staff members possessed the gravitas necessary to appeal to the various factions. Instead,

⁸³ Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 368.

⁸⁴ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 661.

⁸⁵ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1987) 386-390; See also Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008) 490-492.

Abernathy, Young, and Jesse Jackson each appealed to different factions of rank-and-file civil rights supporters.⁸⁶

For Abernathy and SCLC, the Charleston strike forced the organization to move past the failure of Resurrection City. It allowed a civil rights organization that seemed listless to regroup and focus on a new campaign similar to the successful direct-action movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march. Years later, Young contended that Charleston “was almost made-to-order as a focus for the energies of an SCLC staff embroiled in the intrigue of succession. In contrast to the Poor Peoples’ Campaign, the strike by Charleston hospital workers in the spring of 1969 had clearly defined and achievable goals.”⁸⁷

The issue historians encounter when analyzing the Charleston hospital workers’ strike involves the outcome of the campaign. Did the striking workers as well as the two national organizations that led the movement, SCLC and Local 1199, the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Workers Union gain the rights and benefits they sought? The answer to this question varies depending on the group and the historian analyzing each group. For instance, labor historians Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg concluded that the strike did not result in a clear victory for either Local 1199, whose national leaders hoped to establish a strong affiliate of unionized hospital workers in the city, or SCLC, whose leaders failed to mount any successful national civil rights campaigns after Charleston.

Yet despite these setbacks, Fink and Greenburg noted that both organizations did accomplish some of their goals. For SCLC, the strike ushered in a new era of political participation within Charleston’s black community that featured a surge in black voter registration and the election of

⁸⁶ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 390-391

⁸⁷ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 495.

several African Americans to state and municipal public office. For example, in 1970, Charleston's Herbert U. Fielding became the first black citizen elected to the South Carolina State House of Representatives since Reconstruction.⁸⁸ Historian Steve Estes also contends that the strike illuminated the value of political power to Charleston's black community, which resulted in a dramatic increase in voter registration and turnout for local elections.⁸⁹

Local 1199 increased efforts for unionization in hospitals throughout the North in the wake of the Charleston campaign. In one instance, a Baltimore hospital agreed to extend union recognition to Local 1199 merely to avoid the possibility of a prolonged hospital workers' strike similar to the Charleston movement. Working alongside SCLC in Charleston also helped the hospital union enhance its image as a supportive partner in the civil rights struggle.⁹⁰

While Fink and Greenberg assessed the role Local 1199 played in the campaign, Adam Fairclough analyzed the Charleston strike strictly in terms of the SCLC's participation. After describing several of the SCLC's victories in smaller scale campaigns involving school desegregation and voting rights in Alabama, Fairclough labeled the strike as SCLC's "most impressive achievement" during the period from 1968-1971.⁹¹ Christopher P. Lehman also described the Charleston strike as a success for SCLC. Lehman viewed the participation of prominent politicians such as Michigan congressmen John Conyers and Charles Diggs in SCLC's Mother's Day rally on May 11 as an endorsement of Abernathy's leadership of the civil rights organization.⁹² Lehman cited letters from Nixon administration officials, including

⁸⁸ Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 129-158.

⁸⁹ Steve Estes, *Charleston in Black and White: Race and Power in the South after the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 34.

⁹⁰ Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 158.

⁹¹ Fairclough, 394-396.

⁹² Christopher P. Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014) 108.

George Schulz, the U. S. Labor Secretary, and Leon Panetta, Director of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, shortly after the strike's conclusion as positive developments for Abernathy and SCLC.⁹³

By contrast, I argue that it was the most significant event in Abernathy's long career as a civil rights activist. The Charleston strike took place at a critical time for SCLC. The organization's transition to antipoverty campaigns began under King's leadership and Abernathy sought to build on his predecessor's quest for economic equality. In the wake of Resurrection City, the Charleston strike represented an opportunity for Abernathy to solidify his position as the SCLC's leader and carry the civil rights movement into a new decade with a different goal than the campaigns for voting rights and legal access to public facilities. When Abernathy accepted the invitation from Local 1199 to join the strike, SCLC became engaged in a campaign for clear economic objectives and an effort to transform the method of nonviolent direct-action protest into a truly "long" civil rights movement.⁹⁴

On March 22, 1969, Mary Moultrie, the leader of a group of a dozen hospital workers who lost their jobs at the MCH following an attempt to unionize, sent a telegram to Abernathy. In her telegram, Moultrie alerted the civil rights leader to the conditions the strikers faced from the Charleston police department and the state-owned hospital's hostile administration, "There have been over twenty arrests in the last 3 days, and the viciousness of the police is steadily escalating. The beatings and manhandling of black women must be brought to a stop. The anti-union terror campaign in Charleston must halt."⁹⁵

⁹³ Ibid, 118.

⁹⁴ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History*, 91, 4 (March 2005) : 1233-1263.

⁹⁵ Moultrie to Abernathy and Young, telegram, March 22, 1969, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9.

After Moultrie and her co-workers initiated the strike on March 20, SCLC quickly joined the campaign, which also included Local 1199. The strike represented an opportunity for the two organizations to achieve their individual goals by working together. For 1199, the strike provided a chance to determine the feasibility of unionizing in South Carolina, a state with a formidable anti-union business and political structure. For SCLC, the Charleston campaign served as a chance to revive their efforts at waging a successful crusade against poverty in the wake of the Resurrection City failure the previous summer. Moreover, due to the fact that some local residents such as Dave Livingston, a white man who recruited black hospital workers in Charleston for Local 1199, viewed the city's daily newspaper, the *News and Courier*, as "probably the most conservative newspaper in the state," the fledgling union needed SCLC's presence to attract national media coverage of their struggle.⁹⁶

In the immediate aftermath of the 113-day strike, Abernathy labeled the strike as "the outstanding achievement of this year" for SCLC and that its outcome "is a beacon of light" for the working poor.⁹⁷ If the Charleston campaign ended in a significant triumph for SCLC and the civil rights movement, as Abernathy and other SCLC participants such as Jack O'Dell declared, one must identify any gains the hospital workers and African Americans achieved. According to Young, "the key demands in the strike were: (1) union recognition, (2) an end of racial discrimination in wages and hiring, and (3) rehiring of the twelve fired workers." By the time the strike concluded, state and hospital officials met all three of these demands. Yet hospital administrators gradually eliminated the workers' collective bargaining rights and the hospital

⁹⁶ Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 136-139; See also Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 542-542.

⁹⁷ Abernathy, President's Report, SCLC Convention, August 14, 1969, Charleston, SC, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 167, Folder 8.

remains a union-free workplace today. As a result, the strike failed to provide all of the economic and workplace benefits sought by its participants.⁹⁸

Just over a week after Moultrie's telegram to the SCLC leaders, Abernathy and Young traveled to Charleston for the first of many lengthy visits during the course of the campaign in the spring and summer. Speaking to a crowd of 1,500 at Fourth Baptist Church, Abernathy stressed the reason for his trip, "I have come to Charleston on the invitation of the local leaders and the hospital workers who are seeking to be organized into a bargaining force and lift the level of economic plight in this city."⁹⁹ Within two weeks of Abernathy's first speech in Charleston, SCLC's involvement in organizing the strike escalated. In a letter to Esau Jenkins, a local activist who participated in a variety of civil rights causes in Charleston throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Abernathy mentioned "a strong desire on the part of the staff for the 1969 SCLC Convention to be held in Charleston, South Carolina."¹⁰⁰

By the time Abernathy returned to Charleston on April 21, the national media coverage Local 1199B craved materialized in the form of an article in *The New York Times*. The article described a joint statement of unanimous support for the strike from fourteen of the nation's most prominent civil rights leaders, including Coretta Scott King, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins, Negro American Labor Council president A. Phillip Randolph, and National Urban League executive director Whitney M. Young Jr.¹⁰¹ The statement resonated with reporters since it was the first public display of unity among different civil rights organizations since the assassination of King. Three days after the story appeared, James A. Wechsler echoed a similar

⁹⁸ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 498.

⁹⁹ Stewart R. King, "Abernathy Pledges Support To Strikers," *Charleston News and Courier*, April 1, 1969, 1-A, 7-A.

¹⁰⁰ Abernathy to Jenkins, April 9, 1969, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 19, Folder 6.

¹⁰¹ James T. Wooten, "14 Rights Leaders Support Strikers," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1969, Section A, page 29, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9.

sentiment in his column in the *New York Post*. Under the headline “A Clear Cause,” Wechsler wrote that the strike “has already produced one momentous national result. It has reunited civil rights groups that had been mired in fruitless combat over “separatism” and related issues.” Wechsler also admitted that at the outset of the strike, he doubted it would gain national media attention since it “could be so absent-mindedly dismissed as a ‘local South Carolina story.’”¹⁰²

In addition to the growing interest from media outlets outside of South Carolina, additional workers joined the cause as eighty employees of the Charleston County Hospital went on strike on March 28, eight days after Moultrie and the MCH employees left their jobs. The following day, the Concerned Clergy Committee issued a proposal to resolve the strike. The “Peace With Justice Proposal,” a document signed by thirty-four clergymen, featured several specific requests from the ministers that they believed would expedite the process of reaching a settlement. They called for “an impartially supervised election of workers in the non-professional category.” The elected workers “should be empowered to deal with management and also be recognized as spokesmen for the workers.” Following the installation of the elected committee, the proposal stated that the workers should return to their jobs and refrain from further “agitation at work.” Conversely, the clergymen urged the administration of the two hospitals “to reinstate all workers who have been discharged and to drop all charges against the workers which have arisen in this present strife.”¹⁰³

Although the striking workers succeeded in gaining support from national civil rights organizations, attracting attention from national newspapers and magazines, and earning a blessing to unionize from local clergymen, hospital administrators denied the employees’ request

¹⁰² James A. Wechsler, “A Clear Cause,” *New York Post*, April 24, 1969, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9.

¹⁰³ “Peace With Justice Proposal,” Concerned Clergy Committee, March 29, 1969, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9; William Walker Jr., “Picketing Goes on at 2 Hospitals,” *Charleston News and Courier*, March 30, 1969, 1-A, 14-A.

for a peaceful settlement. Instead, senior hospital and government officials, such as Governor Robert E. McNair and MCH president William M. McCord, refused to budge. In response to the Concerned Clergy Committee's request for a diplomatic resolution to the impasse, McCord, who frequently displayed a paternalistic attitude toward the hospital's black employees, equated the strike with an attack against the hospital's patients.¹⁰⁴ Addressing a press conference days after the clergymen issued their proposal and Abernathy's speech at Fourth Baptist Church, McCord succinctly stated that "a strike against the hospital is a strike against the patients." He added that "we cannot sanction lawlessness," and the proposal's call for reinstatement of all the striking workers would force the hospital to bring back "12 persons who were fired for completely disregarding patient care."¹⁰⁵

While McCord refused to entertain any proposal that allowed the striking workers to return to their jobs, McNair cited state law as the obstacle preventing a settlement with the union. He informed the media of a law which barred state institutions, including the hospital, from negotiating with union employees. According to McNair, if MCH officials opened negotiations with the union, it would set a precedent that could result in collective bargaining with union employees at other state-owned hospitals.¹⁰⁶

The strike intensified in late April when Abernathy led a morning march of 2,500 protesters to the Medical College. When Abernathy and his supporters returned to the complex in the evening, Charleston police officers arrested the SCLC president and 101 of his fellow marchers for violating an injunction that limited the size of picket lines. Although Abernathy wrote the

¹⁰⁴ Estes, *Charleston in Black and White*, 25.

¹⁰⁵ Elaine S. Stanford, "McCord Rejects Clergy Committee's Peace Proposal," *Charleston News and Courier*, April 3, 1969, 15-A.

¹⁰⁶ Jack Roach, "McNair Says State Can't Bargain," *Charleston News and Courier*, April 2, 1969, 1-A.

letter on April 26, the public did not learn of his note until six days later when it ran as a paid advertisement in the *News and Courier*.¹⁰⁷

By the time Charleston's citizens read Abernathy's letter in their morning newspapers, Coretta Scott King had arrived to lend her support to SCLC and the striking hospital workers. Wearing a Local 1199 paper hat and a pair of sunglasses, she marched alongside hospital workers to the Medical College on April 30. On May 1, King appeared in a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times*. Along with a photo of a stoic King, the ad consisted of a letter in which she implored readers to support the Charleston strike and "send the largest contribution you can." In addition, she wrote that with a victory for the hospital workers, "Charleston can become that moment in our history when the unity of black and white, of the civil rights movement with organized labor, may be regained." In large bold letters, the words "If my husband were alive today...he would be in Charleston, South Carolina!" flanked the beginning and end of King's letter.¹⁰⁸ Although she did not hold an official position with any civil rights organization, King's support solidified SCLC's credibility with other national civil rights groups and Charleston's black citizens, whom she addressed later in the month at a rally that attracted more than 2,000 people.¹⁰⁹

While the striking hospital workers mobilized behind Abernathy and followed him directly to the Charleston County Jail and Coretta Scott King's presence encouraged the strike's supporters, state and local political officials pushed back against the daily marches. Governor Robert E. McNair issued a state of emergency on May 1 and instituted a 9 p.m.-5 a.m. curfew for the city of Charleston and a portion of North Charleston. The curfew attempted to "cool down" the

¹⁰⁷ William Walker Jr. and Stewart R. King, "Guardsmen Ordered Into Tense Charleston," *Charleston News and Courier*, April 26, 1969, 1-A.

¹⁰⁸ Coretta King, Full Page Advertisement, *The New York Times*, May 1, 1969, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9.

¹⁰⁹ Stewart R. King, "Support Growing, Strikers Are Told," *Charleston News and Courier*, May 30, 1969, 12-A.

atmosphere, which McNair believed had grown uncomfortably tense with “widespread acts of violence and threats of violence, common disregard for the law, and disorders of a general nature.” Stewart R. King and Jack Roach, the *News and Courier* reporters who covered McNair’s press conference noted that the governor’s declaration and SCLC’s unwillingness to depart Charleston until the hospitals agreed to meet the strikers’ demands resulted in an untenable stalemate between the two opposing sides. The reporters described the situation in Charleston at the outset of May, “So it comes down to a battle of wills and cold nerve in a powder magazine of emotion. No one can predict the winner. But Charleston clearly is the almost certain loser.”¹¹⁰

By the time McNair announced the mandatory curfew, the Charleston strike had generated editorials from newspapers outside the Palmetto State. Outsiders viewed McNair’s unwillingness to negotiate with the striking hospital workers, officials from Local 1199 and SCLC as a poor strategic decision which might ultimately trigger a violent outcome similar to the sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis just a year earlier. An April 30 editorial in the *Washington Post* noted the similarities between Memphis and Charleston, “The authorities have refused to meet with the union, insisting that wages and working conditions of public employes [sic] are set by law and therefore not negotiable. Memphis held a similar hard-headed position before Dr. King’s murder, but backed down afterward, spurred on by the tragedy and Federal intervention at the request of President Johnson.”¹¹¹ The editorial concluded with a call for

¹¹⁰ Stewart R. King and Jack Roach, “Curfew Imposed to ‘Cool Down’ Tense Charleston,” *Charleston News and Courier*, May 2, 1969, 1-A.

¹¹¹ *Washington Post*, “A Gathering Storm in Charleston, S.C.,” April 30, 1969, 26-A, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9.

President Nixon to dispatch officials from either the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service or the Labor Department to Charleston in an effort to broker a settlement.¹¹²

One day later, in a message that echoed the *Post*, members of the *Charlotte Observer's* editorial board weighed in on the strike. From the opening paragraph, the editorial served as a rebuke of McNair, McCord, and the Charleston officials, “Official reaction to the Charleston, S.C., hospital strike becomes more and more a case study in the wrong way to handle an explosive labor-civil rights situation.”¹¹³ The newspaper chastised the hospital and state officials for failing “to recognize the potency” of the hospital workers’ cause, which “is ready made for poor blacks—and indeed, poor whites—to rally around.”¹¹⁴

Similar to the column that ran in the *Post* a day earlier, the *Observer* warned of the consequences that awaited Charleston’s local officials if they continued to stubbornly refuse to negotiate with the striking workers, SCLC, and Local 1199:

With each passing day, it becomes politically and practically more difficult to break the Charleston impasse. But costly as it might be for hospital leaders to admit the bankruptcy of their original tactics or, barring that, for Gov. Robert McNair to take them off the hook by stepping in, such belated leadership would be far cheaper than leaving a settlement to come after the sobering violence that could make Charleston another Memphis or another Orangeburg.¹¹⁵

Although prominent out-of-state newspapers openly criticized the inaction of hospital management and state officials, McNair, perhaps emboldened by the support of the *News and Courier* and a host of other South Carolina newspapers, maintained his position that the state would not bargain with representatives of the striking workers. Editorials from other newspapers around the state began to appear on the *News and Courier* opinion pages. On May 4, three days

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ *Charlotte Observer*, “Charleston Runs Very High Risks,” May 1, 1969, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

after McNair imposed the city-wide curfew, the *Greenville News* announced support for the governor's position in an editorial, "The struggle in Charleston may be long and bitter with the ever present danger of major violence. But the stakes are enormous; the welfare of every South Carolina citizen is bound up in the outcome...The position taken by the governor and the General Assembly is that of the people of this state. Let that position be expressed in no uncertain terms."¹¹⁶ Five days later, the Charleston newspaper published an editorial from *The State*, Columbia's daily newspaper, which supported McNair's stance against granting collective bargaining rights to public employees. According to the *State*, "He (McNair) simply cannot allow the non-professional employees of the state and municipal hospitals at Charleston to be represented by a union. That could easily open the floodgates. Other publicly operated hospitals all over the state could easily topple into the union lair. And then perhaps government clerical workers, policemen, firemen, teachers, garbagemen and what have you would get swept up in the union movement."¹¹⁷ The *News and Courier* also published similar editorials of support for McNair from the *Spartanburg Herald* and the *Anderson Independent* in the first ten days after the governor imposed the curfew.¹¹⁸

With the curfew in effect through the first ten days of May, Charleston emerged as "the almost certain loser"¹¹⁹ in the dispute that Stewart R. King and Jack Roach anticipated in their May 2 story on McNair's embargo of the city's nightlife. The Port City's merchants began to feel the economic squeeze that resulted from an inability to conduct business after 9 p.m. every

¹¹⁶ *Greenville News*, "Greenville View: Stakes Are Enormous in Hospital Dispute," in *Charleston News and Courier*, May 4, 1969, 14-A.

¹¹⁷ *The State*, "Comment from Columbia: Public Has Vital Stake in Hospital Issue," in *Charleston News and Courier*, May 9, 1969, 12-A.

¹¹⁸ *Spartanburg Herald*, "Spartanburg View: S.C. Faces Test Requiring Firmness," in *Charleston News and Courier*, May 6, 1969, 10-A; *Anderson Independent*, "Anderson View: McNair Has Used Good Skill and Judgment," in *Charleston News and Courier*, May 10, 1969, 10-A.

¹¹⁹ King and Roach, "Curfew Imposed to 'Cool Down' Tense Charleston," *Charleston News and Courier*, May 2, 1969, 1A.

evening. Business at the city's downtown Holiday Inn, which was forced to cancel "all of our evening functions," dropped precipitously with revenues falling from "around \$900 a day to \$415 a day," according to a hotel spokesman.¹²⁰ Another hotel manager estimated that the curfew had cost his business between \$30,000 and \$40,000 in lost revenue from conventions since approximately 2,000 guests canceled their reservations following McNair's announcement. Even businesses outside the curfew zone, such as Ashley Lanes, a bowling alley located beyond the city limits, struggled to attract customers in the evening hours. According to Johnny Howe, the alley's operator, regular bowling leagues canceled their weekly appointments and revenues after 9 p.m. dipped below \$10 on average. Howe explained the dire financial predicament facing his business as a result of the curfew, "I'm not even doing enough to pay the light bill. If this thing continues, we're going to have to close our doors before long."¹²¹

Abernathy and SCLC refused to wait while McNair, McCord, and other local officials declined to negotiate with the striking workers. The civil rights group organized "The National Mother's Day Poor People's March," in order to generate support of the hospital workers.¹²² The event began with entertainment provided by the Operation Breadbasket Band at 2 p.m. on May 11 and consisted of nearly four hours of songs and speeches a rally prior to the march itself. Accounts vary regarding the exact number of participants that joined Abernathy, Moultrie, and the hospital workers for the three-mile march from County Hall on King Street through downtown and past the city's hospitals. According to John Kifner, the freelance reporter who covered the event for *The New York Times*, 12,000 individuals marched alongside Abernathy

¹²⁰ William Walker Jr., "Curfew Hurting Business," *Charleston News and Courier*, May 9, 1969, 1A-2A.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² National Mother's Day Poor People's March Fact Sheet, May 11, 1969, SCLC Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 57, Folder 9.

through the streets of Charleston.¹²³ *The News and Courier*, citing two law enforcement officials, including Charleston Police Chief John Conroy, estimated the crowd of marchers at “more than 5,000 persons.”¹²⁴

Despite the discrepancy, the march represented a significant achievement for the strike’s participants and organizers in the midst of the two-month standoff. Several prominent politicians, including five members of the U.S. House Representatives, John Conyers Jr. (D-MI), Charles Diggs Jr. (D-MI), Ed Koch (D-NY), Allard Lowenstein (D-NY), and William F. Ryan (D-NY) marched with the striking workers. Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers, joined the marchers, presented a \$10,000 check to Local 1199, and vowed to contribute \$500 per week to SCLC throughout the strike’s duration.¹²⁵

Emboldened by the success of the Mother’s Day march, Abernathy departed Charleston later that evening to attend a May 13 meeting with President Nixon and the Urban Affairs Council to discuss the nation’s poverty problem. The meeting left Abernathy and his acolytes as well as Nixon and his cabinet officials and aides wary of forming any kind of alliance with each other to address the poverty issue. Nixon’s staff took offense at the manner in which Abernathy criticized the administration for their lack of attention to the plight of the nation’s poor, many of whom were African Americans. At one point in the meeting Abernathy offered a particularly insulting comment on his initial lack of confidence regarding the level of assistance the Nixon White House might provide the poor people SCLC represented: “Let history show that this

¹²³ John Kifner, “12,000 March in Charleston In Support of Hospital Strikers,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 1969, 43.

¹²⁴ W. K. Pillow Jr. and Stewart R. King, “Thousands March In Support of Strike,” *Charleston News and Courier*, May 12, 1969, 1A; See Also “Widely Varied Estimates of Marchers Reported,” *Charleston News and Courier*, May 12, 1969, 8A.

¹²⁵ Kifner, “12,000 March in Charleston In Support of Hospital Strikers,” May 12, 1969; See Also “Leaders Link Arms,” a photo of Abernathy, Moultrie, and Reuther marching together, *Charleston News and Courier*, May 12, 1969, 9A.

Administration, of which little was expected, was the one which made America truly keep its long deferred promise to all of its citizens.”¹²⁶

Abernathy’s opening comment, coupled with a list of demands that he directed at the Administration on issues ranging from assistance with the Charleston strike to \$2.5 billion in annual funding for a food program, did not sit well with Nixon or his aides. R. K. Price Jr., one of Nixon’s speechwriters, believed Abernathy’s tone cost the poor people he claimed to champion. In front of an audience consisting of Nixon, the Urban Affairs Council and several members of the president’s cabinet, Abernathy, in Price’s estimation, had “wasted its time with posturing, attitudinizing, sermonizing, and with pleading and wheedling directed not at the problems of poverty, but at the requirements of his own brand of confrontation politics.”¹²⁷ The meeting frustrated Nixon as well. In the wake of Abernathy’s description of a “disappointing and fruitless” summit in his remarks to reporters, Nixon jotted a brief note to John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman, two of his senior advisers who arranged the meeting, “E-H, This shows that my judgment about *not* seeing such people is right. *No More of This!*”¹²⁸

When Abernathy reflected on the strike and his meeting with Nixon and the Urban Affairs Council two decades later, he contended that the president’s refusal to intervene in the impasse indicated a lack of concern for the working poor. As Abernathy saw it,

It was ironic that I should be invited there to consider the plight of the poor only a few days after I had unsuccessfully appealed to this same president for help in securing higher wages for the Charleston hospital workers. Had he really cared about the poor, he might have used the prestige of his office to help settle the strike. I certainly didn’t expect him to initiate national legislation, but a few supportive words would have meant a great deal at that moment. Instead, he

¹²⁶ Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement*, 87-92.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 90.

¹²⁸ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon Volume Two: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) 247-248.

ignored my pleas, then welcomed me at the White House later as if I had never asked for his help.¹²⁹

Abernathy chalked up the harsh remarks he delivered in a press conference immediately following the meeting to the frustration he experienced while listening to assurances from White House officials vowing to reduce poverty while strikers continued to march in Charleston with the hope of improving upon their \$1.30 per hour salaries.¹³⁰

Two days after Abernathy failed to persuade Nixon to intervene in the strike, a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators issued the same request to the president. In a letter to Nixon, the group of 17 senators, led by Jacob K. Javits (R-NY) and Walter F. Mondale (D-MN), implored the president to arrange for a federal mediator to help broker a settlement between the striking workers and state officials. The senators warned the president that any failure to resolve the strike in a nonviolent manner might lead Americans to abandon this concept as a method of settling disputes, “The Charleston strike is a test of the principle of nonviolence at a time when many in America are losing faith in that principle as a strategy for social change.”¹³¹

The letter to Nixon failed to sway Gov. McNair, who offered an immediate rebuttal to the concerned senators. Wary at the prospect that Nixon might actually heed the senators’ request and send a federal mediator to negotiate a settlement, McNair opined that he considered it “quite strange” that the senators chose to endorse the strikers’ “open and willful violation” of South Carolina law. Instead of advocating for federal intervention, McNair thought the senators would be “much more helpful if they would issue a call for public respect for the law and for placing the care of the ill above selfish personal interests.”¹³²

¹²⁹ Ralph David Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 553-554.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 554.

¹³¹ “Senators Ask Nixon’s Help,” Associated Press brief printed in *The New York Times*, May 16, 1969, 31.

¹³² Hugh E. Gibson, “McNair Denounces Senators’ Appeal,” *Charleston News and Courier*, May 17, 1969, 1A.

Nixon ignored the senators' request for the appointment of a federal mediator to intervene in the strike despite the fact that his immediate predecessor, Lyndon Johnson, utilized the same strategy to settle the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis the previous spring. In spite of his dislike for King in the months preceding the Poor People's Campaign, Johnson and his administration did not ignore the participants at Resurrection City. During the early weeks of the encampment, Vice President Hubert Humphrey visited the tent city alongside three mayors, John Lindsay of New York City, Atlanta's Ivan Allen Jr., and Walter E. Washington, the African American mayor of Washington D.C. Humphrey, then in the midst of a presidential campaign, publicly endorsed the campaign, "We in public office want to show our concern, on the one hand, and to indicate the concern of all the American people, both black and white, for the plight of the poor. You're dramatizing to the American people the need of their fellow Americans who are poor. This can be a very helpful educational experience."¹³³ One year later, Abernathy and SCLC discovered that Nixon, who received significant support from the South's white conservatives in the 1968 election, would not extend any public endorsements of civil rights demonstrations. As a result, the dawn of the 1970s presented a formidable political challenge for Abernathy and SCLC.

With both sides holding firm in their respective positions and no prospect for federal intervention, Abernathy and his SCLC colleagues continued to organize marches and rallies. On Thursday May 29, the day before Memorial Day weekend, Coretta Scott King returned to Charleston and joined Abernathy and Moultrie at an evening rally at Stoney Field, a local football stadium. Like the Mother's Day march several weeks earlier, the size of the crowd varied depending on the source. According to the *Charleston News and Courier*, the crowd

¹³³ Ben A. Franklin, "Humphrey and Lindsay Tour 'City' of Poor and Endorse Drive," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1968, 33.

numbered “more than 2,000 people.”¹³⁴ *The New York Times* reported the crowd consisted of “more than 4,500 exuberant Negroes.”¹³⁵

The event featured a triumphant tone despite the fact that local government officials remained steadfast in their refusal to negotiate with the strikers. King read a telegram of support for the striking workers from Ethel Kennedy, the widow of former Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. After questioning the collective inaction of the federal government, which she believed should have threatened to withhold funding from the Medical College Hospital, King told the workers in attendance that their efforts resonated with people throughout the nation, “For what began as a little known strike by black hospital workers has captured the imagination and touched the conscience of millions of Americans. The truth is that you are making history in Charleston.”¹³⁶ When Moultrie, one of the original dozen employees fired by the hospital more than two months earlier, spoke to the crowd she directed her ire at McNair, “Mr. Governor, we’ve got something that you’ll just never be able to beat. Not you, nor your cops, nor your National Guard. Because Mr. Governor, we’ve got a winning combination (Local 1199B and the SCLC).”¹³⁷

Abernathy’s message lacked the dramatic rhetoric present in the speeches delivered by King and Moultrie. The SCLC president reassured the crowd that his organization remained committed to stay in Charleston for the duration of the strike, no matter how long it took for the workers to receive an acceptable settlement from hospital officials, “I’ll tarry here awhile. It might just be I’ll bring the SCLC conference in August to Charleston...the program committee already has made the recommendation.”¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Stewart R. King, “Support Growing, Strikers Are Told,” *Charleston News and Courier*, May 30, 1969, 12-A, 8-B.

¹³⁵ James T. Wooten, “Mrs. King and Abernathy Vow To Push Charleston Strike Aid,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 1969, 21.

¹³⁶ King, “Support Growing, Strikers Are Told,” *Charleston News and Courier*, May 30, 1969, 12-A, 8-B.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

At the start of June, the possibility of a settlement between hospital management and the striking workers appeared imminent. On June 2, McNair retracted the city's curfew following 32 days of enforcement. Although he previously shortened the curfew twice, first from its original eight-hour period (9 p.m.-5 a.m.) to a six-hour time frame (11 p.m.-5 a.m.) and subsequently to a five-hour slot (midnight-5 a.m.), McNair waited until the conclusion of a relatively quiet Memorial Day weekend before abolishing it altogether.¹³⁹

Three days after McNair lifted the curfew and exactly one week after Coretta Scott King spoke at the Charleston rally, she finally received a definitive answer to the question she posited regarding the U. S. government's willingness to support the Medical College of South Carolina through federal funding. In a June 5 letter to Dr. McCord, Hugh A. Brimm, a regional compliance officer with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), ordered the hospital to re-hire the dozen workers who lost their jobs while attempting to unionize two months earlier. The letter represented the culmination of an 11-month investigation, in which HEW officials determined the hospital failed to comply with civil rights regulations. If the workers were not immediately restored to their previous positions with back pay, the hospital would lose an estimated \$12 million in federal funding.¹⁴⁰

Later that day, a meeting between the MCH board of trustees and a group representing the hospital workers produced a settlement. McNair approved the preliminary proposals on June 10 and the lengthy strike appeared destined for a peaceful conclusion following months of strife and turmoil.¹⁴¹ In a startling turn of events, McCord withdrew the settlement offer on June 13. Two of South Carolina's biggest political heavyweights, U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond (R) and Rep. L. Mendel Rivers (D), chairman of the House Armed Services committee and a staunch

¹³⁹ *Charleston News and Courier*, "32-Day Curfew Is Over," June 3, 1969, A1.

¹⁴⁰ James T. Wooten, "U.S. Orders Carolina Hospital to Rehire 12 Negroes," *The New York Times*, June 12, 1969, 39.

¹⁴¹ *The New York Times*, "Accord Fails in Charleston, and Protestors Blame Thurmond," June 14, 1969, 26.

segregationist, met separately with HEW Secretary Robert H. Finch on June 12. Collectively, the two legislators convinced Finch to examine the hospital to determine the accuracy of the non-compliance charges. In his public comments, Thurmond depicted the issue as a local personnel matter to Billy E. Bowles, the Washington bureau reporter for the *News and Courier*.

“Ultimately,” he told Bowles, “any decision about the rehiring of the 12 employes [sic] in question should rest with appropriate officials of the state and the Medical College of South Carolina, not with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.”¹⁴²

Frustrated by the sudden withdrawal of a settlement offer, Abernathy and Hosea Williams, a longtime SCLC staff member, attempted to lead a march of 300 supporters on the night of June 20. Charleston Police Chief John F. Conroy arrested the pair and their supporters reacted violently by throwing “bricks, bottles, and other missiles” at police and members of the South Carolina National Guard. Due to the violent outburst, which neither Abernathy nor Williams instigated, both men were charged with “inciting to riot,” a felony with bail set at \$50,000 each.¹⁴³

With Abernathy in jail, the level of violence on the streets of Charleston increased, including frequent attacks on police officers and “nightly cases of arson,” despite SCLC’s consistent requests for the strikers to engage in nonviolent protests.¹⁴⁴ As a result, the Nixon Administration dispatched William Pierce, a federal mediator, to Charleston to negotiate a settlement on June 24. Three days later, McCord agreed to a settlement that included the rehiring of the twelve workers, whose employment status with MCH persisted as a sticking point throughout the strike. The settlement also provided salary increases for the non-professional

¹⁴² Billy E. Bowles, “Thurmond Says Finch To Review Hospital Strike,” *Charleston News and Courier*, June 13, 1969, 1A.

¹⁴³ Stewart R. King and William Walker Jr., “Curfew Again Imposed Here,” *Charleston News and Courier*, June 22, 1969, 1A, 2A.

¹⁴⁴ Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 568-569.

workers, the installation of a grievance process, and an employees' credit union with voluntary dues.¹⁴⁵

While McCord's decision to settle with the striking MCH workers pleased Abernathy, he elected to stay in jail until the local officials who operated the Charleston County Hospital agreed to rehire all of their striking employees. On July 3, Abernathy walked out of his jail cell to return to Atlanta, a little over two weeks before the remaining strikers reached a settlement with the county hospital.¹⁴⁶ As he left Charleston, Abernathy promised supporters he would return shortly. According to one of his SCLC colleagues, Abernathy would return "to do one of two things—celebrate or demonstrate."¹⁴⁷

The celebration that accompanied the peaceful resolution of the 113-day Charleston hospital strike ended more quickly than many of its organizers envisioned. MCH officials gradually eliminated the grievance procedure and employees' credit union, the two key elements sought by Moultrie and her Local 1199B colleagues. Without these components in place, hospital workers essentially lacked collective bargaining rights as well as the funds and attention to mount another attempt at unionization.¹⁴⁸ Yet the workers' salary increase, which now matched the federal minimum wage, and the rise in political participation within the city's black community served as clear victories for the strikers. Years later, Moultrie recalled that as a result of the strike, "People woke up to the fact that they needed to get out and vote."¹⁴⁹

The four-month strike exacted a heavy toll on Abernathy and SCLC. The physical and mental demands of initiating and participating in nonviolent direct-action civil rights campaigns

¹⁴⁵ Fink and Greenberg, *Upeaval in the Quiet Zone*, 155-156.

¹⁴⁶ James T. Wooten, "Abernathy Leaves Jail, Hopeful of an Imminent Hospital Accord," *The New York Times*, July 4, 1969, 1, 12.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Fink and Greenberg, *Upeaval in the Quiet Zone*, 155-56.

¹⁴⁹ Estes, *Charleston in Black and White*, 34.

for more than a decade caught up to the organization's senior staff members. In a December 1969 interview with *New York Times* correspondent James T. Wooten, Andrew Young commented on the group's dire condition. "We're not healthy," he said. "We're an exhausted organization right now."¹⁵⁰ Young also admitted that SCLC was "not really strong enough to take on any national issues like Birmingham or Selma."¹⁵¹

Shortly after Wooten's story ran in the *Times*' December 25 edition, Young resigned from his position as SCLC's executive vice president in order to pursue a political career. Deprived of its top administrator—Young had taken part in all of the negotiations in Charleston—and with donors sending their discretionary income to Coretta Scott King for her ongoing project to construct a memorial center to honor her late husband, Abernathy presided over an organization plagued by a lack of resources and a dearth of meaningful campaigns to launch. By 1973, just four years after the Charleston strike, SCLC, which once consisted of 125 staff members, was left with just 17 employees.¹⁵²

Despite the SCLC's gradual decline and the failure for both the civil rights organization and Local 1199 to build on the momentum created by the fusion of "union power and soul power," the strike represented a departure from the setbacks suffered by SCLC in Chicago in 1966 and in Resurrection City in 1968.¹⁵³ The Charleston strike demonstrated that SCLC could wage a successful nonviolent direct-action campaign without the planning, organization, and leadership of Martin Luther King. The workers received a tangible economic benefit with a wage increase and Abernathy served as SCLC president for seven years following the strike.

¹⁵⁰ James T. Wooten, "Abernathy and His Civil Rights Organization Are Both 'Tired, Really Very Tired,'" *The New York Times*, December 25, 1969, 35.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 157; See Also, Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement*, 123.

¹⁵³ Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 128.

Charleston served as a culmination to the nonviolent direct-action campaigns that characterized the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. As the 1970s arrived, veterans of the nonviolent campaigns turned to political office as a means to continue their quest for human rights and equality of opportunity. In addition to Young, who served two terms in Congress before representing America as the nation's first black U.N. Ambassador and serving two terms as Mayor of Atlanta, former SNCC chairman John Lewis won a seat in Congress in 1986 and remains an active member of the House of Representatives and former SNCC co-founder Julian Bond served six terms in the Georgia State Legislature from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties. Even Abernathy sought political office. He ran for the congressional seat Young vacated after accepting the U.N. ambassadorship in 1977. More importantly, though the success of Charleston proved fleeting, the presence of SCLC in one of the South's oldest and most segregated cities provided hope for Charleston's black citizens to become politically active and engaged. Young remembers the enthusiasm present throughout the campaign, "When I think of the Charleston strike today, I remember the ebullient spirit of the people, not the negotiating sessions or what we gained from the settlement. Charleston was the singingest, preachingest, clappingest movement since our days in Albany and Selma. In the mobilization of the community, there was a spirituality infused into the marches and the meetings that will always remain with me as an enduring memory."¹⁵⁴

Like Young, Abernathy's memories of Charleston seem limited to the immediate impact of the concessions won by SCLC and the striking workers. He contended that "In many ways the Charleston victory had been the most unambiguous we had achieved since Selma, though it by

¹⁵⁴ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 501.

no means had such far-reaching implications.”¹⁵⁵ In Abernathy’s view, the Charleston strike solidified his position as SCLC leader:

In addition, I had won a personal victory. The Poor People’s Campaign had been conceived and planned under Martin’s leadership, and whatever positive gains we made were attributed to him, while the failures were attributed to me. But the Charleston campaign had been planned and executed under my leadership, and some of the remaining doubters had been silenced. For the first time people were beginning to believe that the SCLC would have a life and a purpose beyond completing the projects already begun by Martin.¹⁵⁶

The gradual decline of SCLC in the second half of 1969 and the early years of the 1970s, however, suggest that Charleston marked the conclusion of the organization’s standing as a powerful civil rights group capable of engaging in large direct-action campaigns. Yet Abernathy remained committed to antipoverty campaigns for the remainder of his tenure as SCLC president and after he resigned from the organization in 1977. As he explained, “It was for that segment of our population—the least fortunate of our brothers and sisters—that Martin gave his life and I worked during my tenure as SCLC president.”¹⁵⁷

A more glaring problem for Abernathy involved his decision to continue emulating King. While few people expected Abernathy to veer from King’s message and strategy during the Poor People’s Campaign due to the fact that King originally planned the encampment and Abernathy’s unfamiliarity in the position of SCLC’s president and public face, he missed an opportunity to establish his own identity as a leader. By writing his own jailhouse letter during the strike, Abernathy attempted to persuade Charleston’s residents of the necessity for salary increases and collective bargaining for the city’s hospital workers. Instead, the “Letter from Charleston County Jail” failed to resonate with the public. Reflecting on the letter twenty years later, Abernathy conceded that, “I tried to imitate Martin and wrote a letter from a Charleston

¹⁵⁵ Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 575.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 587.

jail, but no words of indignation came from the national newspapers, no marching crowds poured into Charleston.”¹⁵⁸

The Charleston strike represents an extension of the chronology of the SCLC’s direct-action campaigns of the civil rights era. The organization’s nonviolent protests did not conclude with the triumphant tone of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights march or with the somber mood of the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike after King’s death. Instead, this era ended with the 1969 Charleston strike, a campaign that resulted in tangible gains for Abernathy and the strike’s participants as well as unfulfilled goals in the years to come.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 572.

CHAPTER THREE:
‘WE HAVE NO SUPERSTARS AT THE MOMENT’

On May 23, 1970, Ralph David Abernathy spoke in front of the last major rally of a direct-action campaign during his tenure as SCLC president. Speaking to a crowd estimated at “close to 10,000 persons,” Abernathy declared that, “over the last 15 years, there has grown to maturity a movement here in the South, with national and international support, that is determined to establish freedom and representative government and an end to the tyranny of racism and war, and we are determined to do it in this decade of the seventies.” Abernathy delivered his remarks at a rally that served as the culmination of a “march against repression” that spanned five days and 110 miles from Perry, Georgia to Atlanta in the wake of multiple high-profile shootings by law enforcement officials in May 1970.¹⁵⁹ Within a two-week period, four anti-war demonstrators died at the hands of the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University, police officers killed two black students at Jackson State College and six young African American protesters in Augusta, Georgia. The Augusta shooting spurred Abernathy and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) into action. At the funeral of Sammy McCullough, a nineteen-year-old victim of the Augusta shooting, Abernathy announced plans for the march. The SCLC president argued that America suffered from a “national climate of fear and

¹⁵⁹ Thomas A. Johnson, “5-Day March in Georgia Ends With Massive Rally,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1970, 1, 38.

repression which has been created by a national Administration in pursuit of a racist political Southern strategy and a militaristic foreign policy.”¹⁶⁰

In addition to Abernathy, the rally featured speeches from Coretta Scott King and U.S. Senator George McGovern (D-SD). McGovern blasted the Nixon Administration for its divisive rhetoric and a political strategy that enhanced tension and distrust between America’s white and black citizenry. The senator declared, “The kind of Southern strategy that makes sense is the kind that we have here today. We cannot afford to expend our energies hating each other. We cannot afford to set worker against student, youth against age, white against black. There will be no end to the violence against hunger and division in America until we end the violence that is devouring our blood and resources in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.”¹⁶¹

In her address to the crowd, King absolved African Americans of blame for the recent shootings, “America, we are not your enemy. Your enemy are those forces of repression in the nation that will silence all dissent in this nation by any means possible.”¹⁶² In addition to the presence of Abernathy and King, the march featured participation from members of Georgia’s NAACP chapters, which co-sponsored the demonstration.¹⁶³ By the end of the 1960s, the NAACP and the SCLC represented America’s two most prominent civil rights organizations. Yet the two groups did not always cooperate in the planning and organizing of direct-action campaigns for civil rights advances. For instance, two years before the Perry-to-Atlanta march, the NAACP did not participate in the Poor People’s Campaign.

At the conclusion of the rally in Atlanta, SCLC activists expressed a sense of optimism about the direction of the organization and the future of the black freedom struggle at the dawn of a

¹⁶⁰ Thomas A. Johnson, “Georgia March Planned,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1970, 1, 25.

¹⁶¹ Johnson, “5-Day March in Georgia Ends With Massive Rally,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1970, 1, 38.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Thomas A. Johnson, “Heat Cuts Into the Ranks of Marchers in Georgia,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1970, 13.

new decade. One SCLC staffer explained the significance of the march and rally to a reporter, “We needed this. Doc [Mr. Abernathy] needed it, S.C.L.C. needed it, the black people needed it and so did the nation.” Another SCLC worker characterized the enthusiasm and solidarity among the march’s participants as “just like Selma to Montgomery—like Birmingham and like the demonstrations in Montgomery.” In addition to SCLC activists, the march’s white participants also described the camaraderie that existed among marchers of both races during the demonstration. According to one white marcher, “This is the first time white people are not marching out of guilt. This is the first time they are marching because they can see that they must act against repression that could crush us all.”¹⁶⁴

Although the march from Perry to Atlanta rekindled the spirit of some of SCLC’s greatest triumphs of the 1960s and the speeches delivered by Abernathy, King, and McGovern stirred passion among the thousands who attended the rally, the organization failed to build on the momentum established by the event. Within three months of the rally, Abernathy identified the reasons for the economic inequality that plagued the nation. In a commencement speech at Bethune-Cookman College, Abernathy proclaimed that the U.S. government’s commitment to the space program siphoned valuable funds from fighting poverty, which he viewed as the nation’s greatest problem. According to Abernathy, collecting rock samples from the moon diverted attention from the uncomfortable reality of starving children in the rural South, “Vice President Spiro Agnew went around the world giving samples of those rocks to hads [sic] of state—when he ought to be traveling in Alabama and Mississippi passing out bread to starving children.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Thomas A. Johnson, “‘We Needed This’—A March Through Georgia,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1970, 137.

¹⁶⁵ *Chicago Defender*, “Nation is Drifting Toward Decay Abernathy Tells Grads,” August 17, 1970, 6.

Unable to mount a large-scale national direct-action campaign such as the Poor People's Campaign or the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march, SCLC engaged in local protests during the early seventies. For example, the organization launched a protest in Butler, Alabama during the fall of 1971. On September 11, a white motorist struck and killed Margaret Ann Knott, a nineteen-year-old black woman as she participated in a sit-in demonstration on the streets of Butler, located in rural Choctaw County, a county with a near even split of African Americans and whites among its 17,000 residents. Knott's death heightened racial tension in a region where blacks began a boycott of white-owned businesses three and a half months earlier and roughly ninety percent of the black students at county schools sat out the first two weeks of the 1971-72 academic year.¹⁶⁶

Abernathy traveled to Butler to speak at Knott's funeral on September 14. Identifying Knott as "one more black martyr" in "the struggle for what is right," Abernathy announced plans for a march in Butler the following day. In his remarks to the crowd of 2,500 attendees, Abernathy declared, "We're going to march tomorrow and the next day and the next and however long it takes to guarantee that people won't have to die for their rights." Leon Clark, the local sheriff, told a visiting reporter that any march would violate a court order prohibiting public demonstrations and result in the arrest of the protesters, "If they march tomorrow, they're going to be arrested."¹⁶⁷

Clark's warning failed to deter Abernathy and Butler's black residents. On September 15, Abernathy led a march of 154 protestors through the streets of Butler. State troopers arrested all of the demonstrators and the apprehension of an additional 39 black youths for a variety of offenses ranging from disturbing the peace and destruction of public property to making a false

¹⁶⁶ James T. Wooten, "Black Girl Gets 'Martyr's Rights,'" *The New York Times*, September 15, 1971, 21.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

bomb threat resulted in a total of 193 arrests. With Abernathy incarcerated at the Choctaw County jail, two other SCLC officials, board chairman Joseph Lowery and Bernard Lee, Abernathy's executive assistant, traveled to Butler. After they arrived in town, Lee proclaimed, "We have decided this is the place to stand our ground."¹⁶⁸

Choctaw County's black residents began their boycott to protest the previous spring's firing of eight black schoolteachers and the lack of black officers on the city's police force and deputies in the county sheriff's department.¹⁶⁹ Following months of relatively uneventful peaceful protests, the death of Knott enticed Abernathy to speak at her funeral and remain in town to lead demonstrations. Abernathy's visit to Butler generated coverage of the previously unknown black freedom struggle in Choctaw County in *The New York Times*, which dispatched a reporter to the town to cover the funeral and subsequent protests. In addition, newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Atlanta Constitution* published the Associated Press wire story of the arrest of Abernathy and the other marchers.

The incarceration of Abernathy and the media coverage that accompanied it brought local leaders from the county's white and black communities and SCLC officials to the negotiating table. The two sides reached an agreement just before Abernathy posted bond and walked out of the Choctaw County jail, three days after his arrest. Terms of the agreement included a stipulation that called for the hiring of a black deputy by the county sheriff's department and a black police officer by the city along with a promise to create an assistant school superintendent position for an African American pending the availability of federal funds. In addition, the accord permitted black children to return to county schools "without reprisal," left open the possibility that one of the fired teachers "would be given an opportunity for re-employment," and

¹⁶⁸ James T. Wooten, "Abernathy Jailed in Alabama Town," *The New York Times*, September 16, 1971, 15.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

established a local biracial advisory board. In return for these concessions, the county's black leaders agreed to a 45-day moratorium on public protests. After his release from the county jail, Abernathy spoke of the agreement in grandiose terms in an address to the city's jubilant black residents, "I hail this not only as a victory for black people but for all poor people in southwest Alabama. I count this as the greatest victory SCLC has ever achieved since I have been president, and also the greatest victory by SCLC since its inception."¹⁷⁰

Abernathy's frequent use of bold rhetoric in his public remarks served as the most distinguishing characteristic between his stint as SCLC president and King's tenure as the organization's leader and public face. In the week before the opening of Resurrection City, UPI reporter Louis Cassels noted that the language and tone of Abernathy's public comments represented a sharp departure from the intellectual appeals made by King, whose speeches resonated with white liberals and the black middle class. Cassels observed that, "Compared to King, Abernathy is less polished and articulate. He lacks King's cool poise and personal magnetism. He is an angrier man. He speaks more bluntly. He says he intends to be more militant than King, and those who have seen him in action during the past six weeks are inclined to believe him."¹⁷¹ During an interview with the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee in 1975, Abernathy viewed a series of internal memos from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to Vice President Spiro Agnew in which the two men depicted Abernathy as a serious threat. According to Abernathy, the two men concurred on the need to "silence" the SCLC president during the Poor People's Campaign in 1968. Abernathy boasted that Agnew wrote in a memo to Hoover,

¹⁷⁰ Associated Press, "Butler, Ala. Gains A Biracial Accord; Abernathy Freed," *The New York Times*, September 19, 1971, 66.

¹⁷¹ Louis Cassels, "Find Abernathy Strongly Devoted to Black People's Cause," *Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1968, 14.

“We’ve got to stop this Ralph David Abernathy because I have discovered that he is one of the most dangerous of all the black leaders.”¹⁷²

Given his penchant for blunt rhetoric, Abernathy’s comments on the resolution in Butler come across as an exaggerated assessment of the accord’s significance by an exuberant leader basking in the immediate aftermath of a clear victory. Years later, in an autobiography that spanned 620 pages, Abernathy did not include a single word about the Butler demonstrations. If Abernathy viewed Butler as “the greatest victory SCLC has ever achieved since I have been president and, also the greatest victory by SCLC since its inception,” it stands to reason that the event would occupy a significant space within his autobiography. By contrast, he devoted an entire chapter to the 1969 Charleston hospital workers’ strike. In his study on the SCLC, Adam Fairclough spends just two sentences on the Butler protests. In the same chapter, Fairclough asserts that the Charleston strike represented “SCLC’s most important achievement” during Abernathy’s presidency.¹⁷³

During the final years of King’s life, Jesse Jackson joined SCLC. Jackson participated in many of the organizations campaigns including the Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march in 1965 and the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike in 1968. Jackson energized the organization with his commitment to improving economic opportunities for African Americans and his formidable talents as a public speaker. Abernathy noticed Jackson’s ability to inspire audiences during the Selma campaign: “Though not a preacher with a permanent pulpit, he could take the language of the sermon and translate it into the language of practical politics and that made him

¹⁷² *Chicago Defender*, “Hoover: silence Abernathy,” November 27, 1975, 38.

¹⁷³ Ralph David Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), Chapter 16, “Charleston,” 540-577; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987) 394-396.

an extraordinary leader of black people—something I recognized in him the first time I heard him speak at Selma.”¹⁷⁴

In addition to his leadership skills, Jackson possessed an entrepreneurial spirit and an attraction to the spotlight. These personality traits occasionally created internal conflict within SCLC during King’s presidency, but King possessed the gravitas to maintain a cohesive environment within the organization and senior staff members, including Jackson, put aside their personal ambitions for the benefit of the organization. Jackson directed Operation Breadbasket, a Chicago-based SCLC program that through a variety of methods, including organized boycotts of individual companies, aimed to increase black employment at businesses and corporations that depended on black customers. In a meeting that took place days before he returned to Memphis for the final time, King attempted to convince SCLC staff members on the necessity to return to Memphis after an ill-fated protest in late March. According to Andrew Young, King told Jackson, James Bevel, and Hosea Williams why they needed to join him in Memphis instead of focusing on their individual pet projects. Speaking directly to Jackson, King said, “Look, whenever you needed me or wanted me to come to Chicago, I’ve always been there supporting your efforts. Now when we’re trying to get a national movement going, I don’t really have your support.”¹⁷⁵

Jackson relented and joined King in Memphis. After King died, Jackson lied to reporters with a false story that the SCLC president died in his arms. Despite this fabrication, Jackson served as city manager of Resurrection City until Abernathy and Young reassigned him and installed Williams into the position at the end of May 1968. As Gerald McKnight notes, “Some of King’s lieutenants harbored deep resentment against Jackson for what they regarded as his

¹⁷⁴ Abernathy, 408.

¹⁷⁵ Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (2nd Edition, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008) 458.

tasteless, self-serving behavior at the time of the civil rights leader's assassination. Jackson engrossed the media with his fake story of reaching the stricken leader first and cradling the dying King in his arms."¹⁷⁶ Abernathy contended that King grew frustrated with Jackson's ceaseless pleas for permission to launch new initiatives that would result in tremendous gains in funds and publicity for the SCLC. According to Abernathy, "After Martin was killed, I inherited the problem of Jesse's entrepreneurial zeal along with the other assets and liabilities of the SCLC. The difference between me and Martin, however, was that I was less inclined to say 'no' and more inclined to say 'maybe'; and for Jesse 'maybe' invariably translated into 'yes.'"¹⁷⁷

By December 1971, less than three months after the resolution of the Butler demonstrations, Jackson's freewheeling actions forced the SCLC to intervene with the administration of Operation Breadbasket. In 1969, Jackson organized Black Expo, a trade fair accompanied by performances and appearances by entertainers, in Chicago. SCLC sponsored Black Expo, which brought in \$66,000 in funds for the organization in 1969, according to Abernathy.¹⁷⁸ Jackson administered Black Expo with little oversight from SCLC's national office in Atlanta.

With Jackson coordinating Black Expo, Abernathy and his staff focused on SCLC's other projects as well as the day-to-day operations of the organization. On September 29, 1970, Jackson formed Black Expo Foundation. Both Illinois state regulations and federal law required foundations and charitable trusts to provide a financial report on an annual basis that included all of the organization's revenues and expenditures. In addition, Illinois regulations stipulated that all new foundations and trusts needed to register with the offices of the state's attorney general and secretary of state. Nearly a year after the formation of the foundation, Jackson, who never

¹⁷⁶ Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998) 120.

¹⁷⁷ Abernathy, 408-409.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 409.

completed the required registration for Black Expo Foundation, created a corporation, Black Expo, Inc., which qualified for tax exempt status from the IRS. Moreover, Illinois did not require financial disclosures from corporations. Jackson formed Black Expo Foundation, allowed the foundation to dissolve through a failure to register with the state, and created Black Expo, Inc., without the knowledge of Abernathy or any member of the SCLC's board of directors.¹⁷⁹ Abernathy first learned of Jackson's activities with the foundation and the corporation when a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* confronted him at Atlanta's Hartsfield Airport as he returned from another trip. When the reporter presented Abernathy with documents which identified Black Expo, Inc. as a private corporation with its own board of directors rather than an affiliate of the SCLC, he realized that the organization needed to deal with a serious legal problem. A contingent of SCLC officials that included Abernathy and the board of directors traveled to Chicago to examine the legal questions involving Black Expo, Inc. and conduct a meeting with Jackson.¹⁸⁰

At the conclusion of a day-long hearing with Jackson on Friday December 3, the SCLC levied a 60-day suspension with pay against the Operation Breadbasket director and the organization announced plans to conduct a comprehensive investigation into Black Expo, Inc. and Jackson's actions. Joseph Lowery, chairman of the SCLC's board of directors, proclaimed, "This action is solely related to Rev. Jackson's repeated violations of organizational policies as an employed member of the SCLC staff and there is no indication of any fiscal dishonesty."¹⁸¹ Jackson attended Operation Breadbasket's Saturday night meeting the day after the announcement of his suspension. As a "guest speaker," Jackson told a crowd of "more than

¹⁷⁹ Angela Parker and Ronald Koziol, "Learn Black Expo Skipped Legal Filing," *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 1971, 1, 2.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*; Abernathy, 409-410.

¹⁸¹ Angela Parker, "Rev. Jackson Suspended From Breadbasket Duties," *Chicago Tribune*, December 4, 1971, 1.

3,000 blacks” his relationship with Abernathy remained strong and the suspension did not signify a rift between the two men. Instead, Jackson blamed Angela Parker, the *Tribune* reporter who broke the story of his covert financial activity with Black Expo, Inc., for the suspension he received. As Jackson saw it, “The issue is that last Friday a black woman reporter left Chicago with her mission being to separate great black men. She took a plane from the Tribune Tower to Atlanta. Now you know who your enemy is.”¹⁸²

After attending the meeting and hearing Jackson’s accusation against her, Parker called Abernathy to get his reaction for the story. The SCLC president absolved Parker of any culpability for Jackson’s suspension. Abernathy explained:

Miss Parker did not give me the impression that she is an enemy of the black man, nor that she was seeking to destroy our organization even tho [sic] Miss Parker may have been seeking to accomplish this goal. She gave me the impression, however, that she had the welfare of black and poor people and the movement at heart and was seeking to bring to my attention some violations, which if not corrected, certainly might destroy the most live and vibrant human rights organization in our nation today.¹⁸³

Toward the end of her story, Parker included reaction from Anna Langford, an alderman on Chicago’s city council and a spokeswoman for the board of directors of the local SCLC chapter, which illustrated the tremendous support for Jackson in the city. When asked what she thought of the national board’s charges of Jackson’s “repeated violations of organizational policy,” Langford asserted that “if Jackson is guilty, the board, too, was guilty.”¹⁸⁴ The combination of the large crowd turnout and the vote of confidence in Jackson issued by Langford on behalf of the local SCLC chapter demonstrated that Jackson did not need Operation Breadbasket and the SCLC to maintain his influence as a leader of Chicago’s black citizens.

¹⁸² Angela Parker, “Jackson Defends Goals; Rips Reporter in Breadbasket Talk,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 5, 1971,

4.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Eight days after the announcement of his suspension, Jackson informed Abernathy of his decision to resign from the SCLC in a telegram. Jackson explained that the length of his suspension left him with no alternative options because, “60 days is too long for Operation Breadbasket to go without leadership.” In *The New York Times*, Seth S. King depicted the resignation as the culmination of a rift between Jackson and Abernathy that originated the previous spring when the SCLC president demanded the relocation of Operation Breadbasket from Chicago to Atlanta, an order which Jackson refused.¹⁸⁵ King contended that Jackson’s resignation “also signaled a struggle for leadership of the national black community mobilized by the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”¹⁸⁶

Jackson held a press conference at the Saturday meeting of Operation Breadbasket to inform his supporters of his resignation. Free from the authority of SCLC, Jackson admitted that his philosophical differences with Abernathy resulted in a strained relationship between the two civil rights leaders, “When it becomes clear two people cannot work together, they should amicably divorce.” Speaking about Abernathy, Jackson added, “I’m glad we have the same goals, but the problem is we are choosing different roads. Progress is impaired when inner conflict diverts us from our course of action. When education and welfare should have made headlines these last few weeks, bridges between myself and Dr. Abernathy have hidden the real problems and the papers have dealt with a personality called Jesse.”¹⁸⁷

Although Jackson insisted that he would create a new organization without SCLC’s assets, one Jackson biographer noted that, “in fact, he transported with him into PUSH not only all of Breadbasket’s files and office equipment but most of its membership, including its entire staff of

¹⁸⁵ Seth S. King, “Jackson Quits Post at S.C.L.C. in Policy Split With Abernathy,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 1971, 1, 42.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Angela Parker, “Jackson and Aides in Breadbasket Resign from SCLC, Plan Own Group,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 12, 1971, 1, 2.

twenty-five, and all but five of its thirty-five board members.”¹⁸⁸ Within one day of Jackson’s resignation, a group of influential black businessmen and politicians met in New York’s Commodore Hotel, where they decided to support Jackson in the establishment of a new “black economic development organization.” Carl Stokes, the former mayor of Cleveland, Richard Hatcher, the mayor of Gary, Indiana, and entertainer Ossie Davis attended the meeting along with singers Aretha Franklin and Roberta Flack. Serving as the group’s spokesman, Stokes explained the reason for the hastily scheduled meeting, “Many of us felt we could not lose the leadership of this young man.” Stokes attempted to absolve Abernathy of responsibility for the group’s decision to support Jackson by declaring, “This is in no way a reproach against S.C.L.C. and the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy.” Yet he confirmed that the group agreed to offer “financial, physical, moral, and professional support” for “a new framework or vehicle” that would allow Jackson to “continue the new thrust in the area of economic development.”¹⁸⁹

With the SCLC’s Chicago chapter dormant in the wake of Jackson’s departure, questions about the organization’s future began to surface at the beginning of 1972. As the fourth anniversary of King’s death approached, a reporter examined the state of the SCLC in a *New York Times* article. One of the main reasons cited for SCLC’s struggle to maintain its position as an effective human rights organization capable of planning and leading large-scale nonviolent demonstrations involved a decline in both financial resources and manpower. At the height of King’s presidency in the mid-sixties, SCLC operated with a staff of 150 along with an additional 1,000 volunteers. The organization’s operating budget during these years often surpassed \$1 million. By the time Jackson resigned at the end of 1971, the SCLC’s full-time staff consisted of

¹⁸⁸ Marshall Frady, *Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jackson* (New York: Random House, 1996), 265.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas A. Johnson, “Jackson Backed at Negro Parley,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1971, 9.

61 employees and its operating budget fell to \$917,000.¹⁹⁰ Since most of SCLC's successful campaigns after King's death took place at the local level in the South, Roy Reed reported that some of the organization's supporters thought Jackson's departure "might prompt the conference to refocus its prime attention on the South." Reed noted, "A few of Dr. King's advisers thought it was a mistake for him to take the organization into the North when he opened his Chicago campaign for economic equality in 1966."¹⁹¹

The article concluded with the remarks of two black men who followed King but did not work for SCLC and they contended that the organization along with other civil rights groups lacked the ability to enact meaningful change in the 1970s. Dr. Vincent Harding, director of the Institute for the Black World in Atlanta, an organization previously affiliated with the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center, asserted that, "When one speaks of the Urban League, of S.N.C.C., of CORE, of S.C.L.C., of the N.A.A.C.P., it is almost as though he is speaking of ghosts because the era of civil rights is over. Yet our movement, on the whole, has not moved forward with the times. We still rely too strongly on the strategies of the past, strategies no longer adequate to the present and future needs of black America." Ivanhoe Donaldson, an African American working as a Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington, offered a blunt assessment of the state of the civil and human rights movements, "We have no superstars at the moment in terms of the civil rights and peace movements. And maybe there's no need for one."¹⁹²

Three weeks after the publication of the *Times* article, Abernathy returned to Chicago. Speaking at the inaugural "Recall to Commitment Rally" at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church,

¹⁹⁰ Roy Reed, "Dr. King's Followers Modify His Approach in their Continuing Pursuit of Social Change," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1972, 9.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

Abernathy told a crowd of nearly 800 people that the SCLC remained committed to Chicago, “I’ve come to reiterate the fact that SCLC is still burning in Chicago and will be here as long as justice reigns.” In a clear reference to Jackson’s comments at the press conference where he announced his resignation nearly six weeks earlier, Abernathy defended the SCLC’s methods of pursuing economic opportunities and social change, “There are those who say that the tools we use to gain our freedom are outdated, but we’re in Chicago on a mission...and, if we perish, we perish.” Abernathy announced Operation Breadbasket’s new leadership team of C.T. Vivian, executive director of SCLC’s Chicago chapter, and Noah Robinson, Jackson’s half-brother, as Breadbasket’s new director.¹⁹³

Even with a new leadership team and renewed commitment from SCLC’s national office, the organization’s Chicago affiliate struggled to raise money and remain relevant after Jackson’s departure. By mid-January 1972, Jackson launched Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) and his new organization continued to raise funds from Chicago’s black community. In March, Vivian accused Jackson’s staff at Operation PUSH of “weakening SCLC’s ability to operate in the black community.” According to Vivian, “Operation PUSH’s refusal to give us an accounting of Black Expo funds and to return all our files and furniture has made it difficult for us to operate in the way we should.”¹⁹⁴

In addition to competing for funds against Operation PUSH, SCLC’s Chicago chapter suffered from internal problems. At the 1972 SCLC annual convention in Dallas, held just seven months after the organization announced its new leadership team in Chicago, Abernathy and the board of directors conducted a five-hour staff meeting to resolve a power struggle between Vivian and John L. Thurston, president of the Chicago chapter. Vivian resigned from his

¹⁹³ Lucille Younger, “Abernathy: SCLC Won’t Die,” *Chicago Defender*, January 24, 1972, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Angela Parker, “PUSH Is Weakening SCLC, Leader Says,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 1972, 27.

position days before the meeting took place on August 17. Similar to the rift between Operation Breadbasket and SCLC's national office that resulted in Jackson's resignation the previous year, the feud between Vivian and Thurston stemmed from a dispute over the finances of the organization's Chicago affiliate. Members of the Chicago chapter's board of directors accused Vivian of "excessive spending and excessive salaries" for staff members that he hired without the approval of the local board. According to Thurston, who presented his complaints about Vivian's actions to Abernathy and the organization's national board, "Dr. Abernathy listened to the whole discussion, and he said that whatever was decided about the Chicago chapter would be up to the board and me as president."¹⁹⁵

Financial woes continued to present a formidable challenge for Abernathy and SCLC in 1973. In order to stay alive, the organization reduced its staff to just 17 full-time employees by the end of 1972. The organization's annual operating budget, which peaked at \$4 million in 1968 when donors filled SCLC's coffers in the wake of King's assassination, topped out at \$500,000 in 1972. By April, Abernathy remained unsure if the 1973 budget would match the previous year's total.¹⁹⁶ Abernathy explored all options to increase the organization's funds and manpower, including meeting with Jackson in early March to discuss a potential merger with Operation PUSH. The common challenge of raising money and building an organized opposition to Richard Nixon's domestic policies brought the two men together to discuss collaboration opportunities for the two organizations.¹⁹⁷

Within two weeks of their initial meeting, Abernathy and Jackson announced plans to lead a series of marches and demonstrations to protest Nixon's economic policies. At a news

¹⁹⁵ Jeannye Thornton, "Abernathy Ends Furor Over Vivian," *Chicago Tribune*, August 18, 1972, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Austin Scott, "Funds Are Dwindling As SCLC Seeks Future in New Directions," *Washington Post*, April 1, 1973, A1, A22.

¹⁹⁷ Paul Delaney, "2 Civil Rights Groups Weigh Merger," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1973, 14.

conference at PUSH's Chicago headquarters, where leaders from SCLC, the National Welfare Rights Organization, and PUSH conducted a two-day strategy session, Abernathy declared Nixon's policies prompted the collaboration of the organizations in spite of any previous disagreements. "But Richard M. Nixon is going to bring us closer together." He continued, "Whatever differences we had were all in the family." Despite the united front displayed by Abernathy and Jackson at the press conference, the PUSH leader refuted reports of a potential merger with SCLC.¹⁹⁸

Three weeks later, on the fifth anniversary of King's assassination, Abernathy and Jackson led a group of 500 demonstrators on a march through downtown Atlanta. Beginning at King's former church, Ebenezer Baptist, Abernathy and Jackson led marchers to the Georgia Capitol building and Atlanta's City Hall before reaching Herndon Stadium on the campus of Morris Brown College, where they addressed the crowd of fellow demonstrators. At City Hall, Abernathy read a list of demands for Atlanta mayor Sam Massell and left a copy of the list with a secretary. When Abernathy called for the dismissal of John Inman, the city's police chief, a chant of "Fire Inman" broke out among the marchers. Other demands included the establishment of a citizens review board to examine the distribution of revenue sharing funds and a call for the reduction of sales taxes. Upon reaching the stadium, demonstrators heard speeches from Abernathy, Jackson, and several other speakers. Abernathy and Jackson directed their ire at the Nixon Administration. Jackson spoke of the need for "civil disobedience in the governors' offices. Let it be known we'd rather eat in jail than starve in the streets." Abernathy warned the crowd of Nixon's ability to cut anti-poverty programs that America's impoverished citizens depended on, "We have a dangerous man on our hands, by the name of King Richard the First. We've got to say to Pharaoh Nixon that black people, poor people, are not going to sit idly by

¹⁹⁸ Paul Delaney, "Rights Units Plan Nixon 'Offensive,'" *The New York Times*, March 12, 1973, 17.

while he cuts out all the programs. We're not going to let Mr. Nixon rebuild Hanoi and rebuild North Vietnam when, hell, he had no business tearing it up in the first place."¹⁹⁹

The SCLC failed to build on the energy generated by Abernathy and Jackson at the outset of the "spring offensive" on Nixon's economic policies. The Atlanta march and rally on the anniversary of King's death followed the same paradigm as many of Abernathy's public addresses at demonstrations after the split with Jackson at the end of 1971. As a reporter noted in a *Washington Post* article on the decline of the SCLC, Abernathy's speaking engagements involved traveling to a city to "deliver a few speeches, maybe hold a rally, perhaps participate in a march, then go somewhere else to repeat that performance. In his speeches, attacks on national policy toward the poor get an emphasis equal to—or greater than—the local issue that brought him in."²⁰⁰

While other members of King's inner circle at SCLC turned their attention to different methods in their quest to lift blacks from poverty into the middle class, Abernathy and SCLC utilized many of the tactics that King employed a decade earlier, such as marches and fiery rhetoric. For example, Andrew Young, executive director of SCLC under both King and Abernathy, left the organization in 1970 to pursue a political career. By the spring of 1973, Young worked toward enacting social change as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, serving Georgia's fifth district. Although he no longer worked alongside Abernathy with the SCLC, Young contended that he remained committed to the organization's goals. "I've obviously staked my life with politics," Young told the *Washington Post*. "I hope I'm in the movement in a new form. My commitment to the things we were struggling for in SCLC hasn't

¹⁹⁹ Gregory Jaynes, "March, Rally Mark King's Death," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 5, 1973, 12A.

²⁰⁰ Austin Scott, "Funds Are Dwindling As SCLC Seeks Future in New Directions," *Washington Post*, April 1, 1973, A1, A22.

swerved a bit.”²⁰¹ One month before Operation PUSH held its second annual convention in July, Jackson explained the difference between PUSH and other civil rights organizations, such as the SCLC, “PUSH is on the offensive. The movement has changed from traditional civil rights to social justice. Civil rights asked the questions where shall men eat, where shall men live? Social justice raises the questions whether men shall eat, whether men shall live.”²⁰²

Frustrated by SCLC’s dire financial position and the organization’s struggle to raise funds amid a crowded landscape of organizations dedicated to the advancement of civil and human rights, Abernathy announced his resignation on July 9. In a press conference at the organization’s headquarters, Abernathy cited SCLC’s lack of adequate finances as the reason for his decision to step down from the organization he co-founded with King and other black preachers in 1957, “I am resigning because of a lack of financial support which is so desperately needed at this time to institute and carry out creative and dynamic programs in a nation in crisis.” Abernathy blamed SCLC’s financial troubles on Coretta Scott King’s efforts to raise money for the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change, which he believed siphoned funds away from the SCLC since King reached out to many of the same donors that SCLC targeted. The SCLC president declared that King’s widow, “still receives 100 percent of my backing in her work,” but Abernathy contended that the SCLC deserved a share of the funds raised by King and the center’s staff. Abernathy informed reporters that the SCLC had a debt of \$50,000 and possessed \$30,000 in assets, stocks, and bonds.²⁰³

In addition to King’s widow, Abernathy also criticized affluent black citizens for their lack of support. Abernathy argued that middle class black Americans earned their social status through the organization’s “struggles and the struggles of other poor people but will not support SCLC

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Paul Delaney, “Operation PUSH Gains Strength In Its Second Year,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1973, 21.

²⁰³ Paul Delaney, “Abernathy Resigns Post, Scoring Affluent Blacks,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1973, 30.

financially and make it possible for this organization to meet its obligations and commitments.” He added that, “If poor people are unable to finance the movement but can and will supply the troops, then certainly the middle class black people who have ‘arrived’ and now receive fairly decent salaries should supply the finances.” Abernathy told reporters that his resignation would take effect on August 16 at the SCLC’s annual convention and he planned on devoting more time to his position as pastor of Atlanta’s West Hunter Street Baptist Church.²⁰⁴

Abernathy’s decision to resign elicited a wide variety of reactions from activists that worked with him as well as members of the news media. Jesse Jackson told a reporter that he attempted to reach Abernathy by phone “four or five times” after the press conference, but he failed to connect with his former colleague. Jackson described his relationship with Abernathy as “sound” and he added, “I have great personal concern for him. I hope that the organization will survive his resignation. I’ll do anything I can to help.” Ben Branch, another Chicago-based SCLC veteran, learned of Abernathy’s resignation from a reporter. Branch expressed regret after receiving the news, “I’m sorry to hear about that. I don’t know of a person more dedicated to the welfare of the people than Ralph Abernathy.” According to Branch, some SCLC officials never embraced Abernathy’s leadership style, “They were looking for Ralph to be a Martin Luther King, and he (Abernathy) kept telling them there was no way he could do that.”²⁰⁵

In their assessment of Abernathy’s years of service to the SCLC and his tenure as the organization’s president, several newspaper columnists asserted that he performed well under very difficult circumstances. Frank L. Stanley, a *Chicago Defender* columnist, acknowledged that Abernathy “had a nearly impossible task from the very outset, not only to follow MLK Jr. as SCLC’s leader, but to hold the organization together.” Stanley agreed with Abernathy’s

²⁰⁴ JoNina Erwin, “Abernathy Quits SCLC Post, Blasts Lack of Support,” *Chicago Defender*, July 10, 1973, 2, 21.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

argument that middle class blacks crippled the SCLC by failing to provide financial support in the years since King's death. According to Stanley, "We have yet to learn that our most successful blacks actually stand no taller than our lowliest poverty-stricken brothers and sisters in the worst hell holes of America." Stanley concluded with an argument that black Americans still needed the SCLC, "We still need a well-financed, active, crusading Southern Christian Leadership Conference even more effective than in Dr. King's hey day. Obviously it has and can continue to perform a service not duplicated by any other of our black-oriented civil rights organizations."²⁰⁶

Vernon Jarrett, a black columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, argued that Abernathy suffered from the inevitable comparisons to King by the news media and black citizens. Jarrett contended that reporters and SCLC supporters viewed King as a savior. As a result, King's death "was more a crucifixion than an assassination" and that the general public preferred civil rights leaders like King, who "had become a celebrity capable of attracting other celebrities, who, in turn could appeal to the hero-hungry black masses." According to Jarrett, the role of "messiah" never suited Abernathy, "I often had the feeling that he hungered for the old days, the old movement that started in Montgomery in December, 1955, when a group of unknown, unsung, nobodies won a monumental victory and set off the Black Revolt of the 1950s." Jarrett expressed concern over the effectiveness of the civil rights movement, especially if black Americans needed a celebrity to inspire them to participate in the quest for economic opportunities and social justice. "It is very easy to criticize the personalities of Dr. Abernathy, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins, and other noncharismatic [sic] leaders," he noted. "But if the black civil rights movement must rely

²⁰⁶ Frank L. Stanley, "Ralph Abernathy Fought Well Against Big Odds," *Chicago Defender*, July 21, 1973, 8.

on messiahs rather than planned, consistent, grass-roots programs then civil rights activity will become nothing more than a series of publicity stunts.”²⁰⁷

Although Jarrett and Stanley argued that Abernathy fared well as SCLC president given the tremendous challenge that came with replacing the movement’s most iconic figure, Carl Rowan offered a dissenting opinion. In his syndicated column, Rowan contended that Abernathy lacked the leadership skills to succeed King, “I don’t know five black people of real perception who truly believe Abernathy should have succeeded the assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Abernathy lacked the articulation, the emotional balance, the sense of timing, the forcefulness of personality required to maintain SCLC as a vibrant force.” Rowan asserted that, “Everyone around knew that Andrew Young, now a congressman from Atlanta, would have made a better successor.” In addition, Rowan believed, “Abernathy’s less-than-brilliant, not-so-inspiring leadership is what led to the demise of SCLC.” To support this claim, Rowan cited the Poor People’s Campaign, which he labeled “a disaster because no one could figure out what game Abernathy was playing. The poor folks were miserable in the rain and mud while Abernathy often was comfortable in a motel.” Rowan noted that other civil rights organizations also struggled to remain relevant during the early 1970s. According to Rowan, SNCC and CORE “are almost unheard of these days” while the NAACP and the National Urban League “are not giving the same kind of leadership they once did.” He cited Abernathy’s estimation that the SCLC would likely raise \$500,000 in 1973 as evidence of the organization’s inability to generate a mass following. Rowan declared that, “The truth is that most of the current civil rights groups have no mass following. None of the groups is motivating and directing the mass of blacks to take bold, meaningful steps in the interest of their own freedom.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Vernon Jarrett, “Abernathy’s Refusal to Play Messiah Game,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 22, 1973, 50.

²⁰⁸ Carl Rowan, “Abernathy as Head of SCLC,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 16, 1973, 4A.

While Rowan blamed Abernathy for SCLC's descent into a financial crisis and cultural irrelevancy, the organization's staff and board of directors engaged in a frantic fundraising drive in an attempt to persuade Abernathy to reconsider. On July 23, two weeks after Abernathy announced his resignation, Bernard Lee arrived in Chicago to raise money for the organization. Stressing the need to earn contributions from white donors, the SCLC's executive assistant told reporters that, "We are refusing Dr. Abernathy's resignation. Our strategy is to strengthen our national structure, not look for a new charismatic leader to head the organization."²⁰⁹ Lee listed \$25,000 as the amount he hoped to raise in the Chicago stop on a nationwide fundraising tour. He also hinted at a possible reconciliation between Abernathy and Coretta Scott King. Lee characterized the differences between King's successor and his widow as "minimal" and he added that, "If Nixon and Brezhnev can get together and if Kennedy and Wallace can get together, I think Dr. King's widow and his best friend will be able to iron out their problems."²¹⁰

At the time of Lee's fundraising trip, Abernathy clarified his criticism of Mrs. King in remarks to a reporter. He reiterated his support for Coretta King and the work she intended to spearhead as the King Center's leader. Abernathy explained that his primary concern involved the fundraising process, in which some donors might not understand the difference between the SCLC and the King Center. Abernathy proclaimed that, "It has always been my position that Mrs. King has every right in the world to the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change. It is unfortunate that the public has not known there is a great deal of difference between that organization and SCLC. It is my belief that when they give to the center they think they're giving to SCLC." In addition, Abernathy expressed his belief that SCLC should handle the role

²⁰⁹ Clarence Page and Mark Kogan, "SCLC To Rely On White Aid," *Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 1973, 26.

²¹⁰ Robert McClory, "2d SCLC Leader Urges Abernathy To Stay," *Chicago Defender*, July 24, 1973, 4.

of expanding on the work of King, “I was one of those who felt that Dr. King should be memorialized, but I did not feel there was a need for another organization.”²¹¹

In an interview with the same reporter, Coretta Scott King expressed her belief that, “people who give to both organizations know the difference.” She also explained her goals for the center, which extended beyond a memorial to her late husband, “The center has grown slowly because we did not want to push it too quickly. We want a dynamic memorial, not a brick-and-wall structure. We want something that is lasting, in the spirit of the man, in the magnitude of the man.” When asked about the possibility that SCLC might ask Abernathy to rescind his resignation and continue to serve as the organization’s president, King told the reporter that the organization should accept the resignation, “Rev. Abernathy has made his resignation and I feel it should be respected. I’m sure he has given it a lot of thought.”²¹²

Despite King’s belief that SCLC should accept Abernathy’s resignation and select a new leader, officials within the organization remained persistent in their attempts to persuade him to continue as president. Speaking alongside Abernathy at the annual conference of the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies on July 19, Hosea Williams offered a grim prediction for the organization without Abernathy. After serving in the organization’s national office with both King and Abernathy, Williams left to launch SCLC’s Atlanta chapter. He told the crowd, “I don’t see anybody who can replace Ralph. I can’t take the gamble on not having a brother at the national level. I know what would happen to me without Ralph—they’d put me in jail and throw away the key.” Williams believed Abernathy

²¹¹ Joel Dreyfuss, “Crisis at SCLC: Which Way for the Blacks’ Leadership?” *Washington Post*, July 24, 1973, A9.

²¹² *Ibid.*

would stay on if ordinary black citizens chose to participate in SCLC activities, “It depends on organizing the people. Ralph will listen to the poor people.”²¹³

When Abernathy placed some of the blame for SCLC’s financial troubles on the black middle class at the press conference in which he announced his resignation, he alienated individuals within that sect of America’s black community. Three weeks before SCLC held its 16th annual convention, a group of civil rights activists and black businessmen in Chicago expressed their frustrations with Abernathy’s tenure at the helm of SCLC. Edwin C. Berry, a former executive director with the Chicago Urban League and fundraiser for SCLC during King’s presidency, criticized Abernathy for a failure to reach out to potential fundraising contacts. According to Berry, “Folks won’t give you money without being asked. They won’t even pay a gas bill unless you send them one. And to suggest there is no one in the country to replace him is just silly. Anyone who followed Martin [Luther King Jr.] in that job was going to have a rough time.” Berry added that SCLC officials never asked him to raise money for the organization despite his five-year stint as a Chicago-based fundraiser when King served as president, “But since then I have not been asked to do one thing even tho [sic] Ralph knew the role I had played. If he missed me in Chicago, he must have missed a lot of others.”²¹⁴

Earl B. Dickerson, one of Chicago’s prominent black businessmen, echoed Berry’s sentiments. Dickerson cited a meeting of the city’s black businessmen, in which each individual pledged to donate “\$50 to \$100 a month” to provide a financial baseline for King to come to Chicago in 1966, as one example of support for SCLC by members of the black middle class. He also predicted larger contributions to civil rights organizations as blacks continued to ascend into America’s middle class, “However, I will grant that many blacks have not been responsive,

²¹³ Claudia Townsend, “Abernathy May Be Talked Into Staying,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 20, 1973, 20A.

²¹⁴ Paul Gapp and Clarence Page, “Blacks Here Disagree With Abernathy,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 27, 1973, 10.

mainly because they are catching up with the fruits of our capitalistic society. But as blacks become experienced as middle class citizens, they give more freely.”²¹⁵

Despite skepticism of Abernathy’s claims from middle class blacks such as Berry and Dickerson, SCLC officials believed that King’s designated successor remained the best option to lead the organization. In addition to the public pleas for Abernathy to rescind his resignation made by staff members such as Bernard Lee and Hosea Williams, the organization’s leaders delayed forming a search committee for the position until one week before the convention opened in Indianapolis.²¹⁶ Outside of Coretta Scott King and Jesse Jackson, few other candidates received any mention as possible successors to Abernathy from the news media. Neither King nor Jackson displayed any interest in the position. Two days before his resignation took effect, Abernathy reiterated his claim that he knew of “no candidate on the horizon whom I could suggest to take over the office.”²¹⁷

On August 15, following a contentious all-night meeting of SCLC’s board of directors, chairman Joseph Lowery announced that the board rejected Abernathy’s resignation. Abernathy subsequently agreed to continue serving as the organization’s president. Lowery announced that, “We have prayerfully weighed all options in this crisis and have firmly concluded that at this moment in history, Ralph David Abernathy is the man for the presidency.” In remarks to a reporter, an unidentified SCLC official characterized the lengthy board meeting as “very traumatic, with screaming matches and strong accusations.” One of the main points of contention addressed in the meeting involved the makeup of SCLC’s national staff. In the weeks between the announcement of his resignation and the convention, Abernathy suggested that part of SCLC’s struggles resulted from the organization’s national staff, which Abernathy inherited

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Jim Stewart, “Abernathy Successor Hunt On,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 9, 1973, 13A.

²¹⁷ Clarence Page, “SCLC May Ask Abernathy To Keep Post,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 15, 1973, 14.

from King. On the convention floor, Hosea Williams proposed a resolution that sought the resignation of SCLC's national staff so Abernathy could pick his own staff. The proposal never received a vote and Abernathy pledged that he "will not ask the staff of SCLC to resign."²¹⁸

In his address to the crowd, a rejuvenated Abernathy reaffirmed his commitment to lead SCLC through the uncertainty that accompanied a new era of the black freedom struggle. Abernathy proclaimed that, "I feel now that I have not only a mandate from Martin, a mandate from God, but a mandate from Black America. Let me assure that I accept this challenge and this responsibility."²¹⁹

Within three years of his triumphant address in Indianapolis, Abernathy's "mandate" dissolved when Chauncey Eskridge, SCLC's top fundraiser, asked Abernathy to resign at a private dinner with several other board members. In the wake of that uncomfortable meeting, Abernathy opted to follow Young's example and pursue a career in politics, the new arena of civil rights.²²⁰

Three months before Abernathy announced his resignation in July 1973, Maynard Jackson described the evolution of the civil rights movement to a student group at Morris Brown College. Seeking to become Atlanta's first black mayor, Jackson outlined his vision for the next chapter of civil rights participation, "I think that politics is the civil rights movement of the 1970s. I believe that it is the last nonviolent hurrah for those of us who believe we can make significant changes within the system." In his address, Jackson acknowledged the gains that resulted from marches and demonstrations in the sixties. Yet he noted that the civil rights battlefield must move from the streets into capitol buildings in order to advance the movement. According to

²¹⁸ Joel Dreyfuss, "Dissent-Torn SCLC To Try To Regroup Behind Abernathy," *Washington Post*, August 16, 1973, A7.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Abernathy, 580-584.

Jackson, “We have seen a modulation now in the form of our protest...It is in politics now. It says if you have enough votes, you can change how we live.”²²¹

Christopher P. Lehman argues that Jackson’s victory in the 1973 Atlanta mayoral election represents the moment when the civil rights leaders of the 1960s turned away from protests and demonstrations and embraced the potential to enact social change through politics. Jackson’s win came on the heels of Andrew Young’s election to the U.S. House of Representatives, and Lehman asserts that it “gave weary civil rights leaders an excuse to announce that they would stop marching and withdraw into boardrooms and think tanks.”²²² Young believed that pursuing a political career “seemed like a natural culmination of so much we had worked for in the sixties. No objective of our Southern campaigns was more well focused than our voter registration drives, which we knew would affect politics in the South forever.”²²³ Yet while public office appealed to civil rights leaders, one historian notes that in Atlanta, white businessmen wielded enough power that both Jackson and Young realized that they needed support from this group in order to advance policy agendas during their respective mayoral terms.²²⁴

After Young won a third term as the representative for Georgia’s Fifth District in the fall of 1976, Jimmy Carter, fresh off his victory over Gerald Ford in the presidential election, tapped Young to serve as America’s ambassador to the United Nations. As a result, a field of twelve candidates entered a special election to fill Young’s congressional seat in the winter of 1977. Abernathy announced his candidacy at a press conference on January 5. In his address to reporters, Abernathy criticized John Lewis, executive director of the Voter Education Project,

²²¹ Austin Scott, “Funds Are Dwindling as SCLC Seeks Future in New Directions,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 1973, A1.

²²² Christopher P. Lehman, *Politics, Power, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014) ix-xi.

²²³ Young, 507.

²²⁴ Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 240-241.

former SNCC chairman, a participant in the 1965 Voting Rights March, and the favorite among the eight black candidates in the field. Abernathy contended that, “I had the privilege of bringing John into the movement. I worked and fought in order that John Lewis and everyone would have the right to get in the race.” In addition, Abernathy portrayed Lewis as a candidate who lacked identifiable positions on any issues: “I really don’t know what John Lewis’s views are...His views have been to keep a very clean office, and to see that the papers and everything else are in place.” Abernathy also predicted that Young, his former top aide at SCLC, would endorse him in the race.²²⁵

In order to focus on the race, Abernathy resigned from SCLC, months after several members of the organization’s board of directors asked him to step down in a private meeting. Years later, Abernathy explained that his tenuous status at SCLC did not serve as the primary reason for his decision to enter the congressional race, “Don’t misunderstand my motives in running for Congress. I did not simply use the race as a way of bowing out, with never a thought of winning. I *wanted* to win. I wanted to go to Congress—not only because it would have partially vindicated me in my own eyes, but also because it was an opportunity to render greater service to our people.” Yet Young’s promotion to a key position in the Carter Administration allowed Abernathy to resign from SCLC without any public speculation regarding his departure from the organization.²²⁶

Abernathy’s goal throughout his tenure as SCLC president, eliminating poverty, served as the anchor for his congressional platform. In his first press conference, Abernathy proclaimed that, as a congressman, “I will foster a program that will eliminate ill housing; while at the same time putting America back to work by offering tens of thousands of jobs to America’s unemployed in

²²⁵ Frederick Allen, “Abernathy in Congress Race,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 6, 1977, 6A.

²²⁶ Abernathy, 584.

building new homes for the poor and thereby reducing crime substantially.” The other issues Abernathy championed included providing jobs with a livable wage to “every able-bodied American man and woman,” enhancing quality of life for senior citizens, and ensuring the preservation of the Chattahoochee River. In addition, Abernathy listed promoting Atlanta as the “WORLD’S NEXT GREATEST INTERNATIONAL CITY” among his goals as a congressman. Abernathy argued that if he won the election, “This will enhance and point the way for American [sic] and the world that Atlanta’s multi-racial society is not only a reality, but a stable success.”²²⁷

Abernathy’s campaign literature featured images of the multi-racial society that he advocated in his initial press conference. Brochures that described Abernathy as “A Proven Man For All Seasons,” contained photos of Abernathy with various dignitaries and groups. Words of praise from Benjamin L. Hooks, Tennessee’s first black criminal judge and the incoming executive director of the NAACP, sat just below a photograph of Abernathy addressing a table full of well-dressed white citizens. A message of support from Jimmy Carter, Georgia’s biggest civic booster outside of former Atlanta mayor William Hartsfield, occupied the space above the photo. In addition, multiple photos of Young appeared in the brochure, including one in which the two former SCLC staff members sat together wearing the denim outfits worn by demonstrators as protest apparel during the sixties. The phrase, “In strategy conference with closest confidante,” served as the photo’s caption. Another photo showed Young in a playful embrace with Abernathy’s son Kwame, the youngest of his four children.²²⁸ Neither Carter nor Young

²²⁷ Ralph David Abernathy, “Abernathy For Congress” official statement, January 5, 1977, SCLC Papers, Box 76, Folder 1, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²²⁸ Ralph David Abernathy, Campaign Brochure 5th U.S. Congressional District Special Election 1977, SCLC Papers, Box 76, Folder 1, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Emory University.

endorsed Abernathy for the open seat. The photos and messages came from Abernathy's previous personal correspondence with the men.

In 1977, the electorate of the Fifth District consisted of an approximately 60-40 split with whites representing the majority. Yet Young won three consecutive congressional elections from 1972-76 and Jackson carried the district in the 1973 mayoral election. Out of a field of 12 candidates, many observers listed two white men, Democrat Wyche Fowler, president of Atlanta's city council, and Republican Paul Coverdell, a state senator, and two black men, Abernathy and Lewis, as the top contenders to advance to a runoff. David Nordan, political editor of the *Atlanta Journal*, noted that both Fowler and Lewis, the two frontrunners, extolled the virtues of a diverse district where a candidate needed a biracial coalition of voters to get elected. According to Nordan, "the real significance of the upcoming race is that in a city in a Deep South state where racial demagoguery and politics have been interchangeable words, every candidate who wants to be taken seriously is walking a tightrope not to offend anyone of a different color." Nordan contended that the significance of appealing to a biracial coalition of voters represented a sign of progress for the city, "This says simply that Atlantans are coming around to the realization that their problems have no color, that they likely are more interested in getting them solved than worrying about the race of the fellow who sits in the chair."²²⁹ As historian Kevin M. Kruse demonstrated, Nordan's depiction of Atlanta as a progressive city where race no longer mattered in local elections does not hold up. As African Americans moved into the city during the postwar decades, white residents fled to Atlanta's growing suburbs. According to Kruse, the city's black residents accounted for just over a third of Atlanta's total population in 1960. By 1980, African Americans represented "a full two-thirds" of the city's population. Moreover, the white residents that remained inside Atlanta possessed an outsized

²²⁹ David Nordan, "Skin Color: An Issue or Not in 5th District?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 30, 1977, 15A.

influence on local politics since the city's most powerful business leaders remained overwhelmingly white.²³⁰

From the outset of the race, Abernathy faced an uphill battle against Fowler and Lewis. As president of Atlanta's city council, Fowler developed a favorable reputation among the district's electorate and understood the dynamics of local elections. Reflecting on the race in his autobiography, Abernathy admitted that he lacked the political skills to run an effective campaign against Fowler, "In the first place, I had spent most of my time out on the road, stamping out brush fires in the region, neglecting to build up a strong network of political allies in Atlanta. I was well known, but only at a distance, whereas Wyche Fowler and the other candidates had been shaking hands and meeting voters for years."²³¹

While Fowler benefited from an intricate network of political contacts within the district, Lewis emerged as the strongest black candidate in a race that featured eight African American entrants. In addition to receiving endorsements from prominent members of Atlanta's black community, such as Maynard Jackson and Martin Luther King Sr., Lewis scored a major coup when he earned an endorsement from Young three weeks before the March 15 election. Young's decision to support Lewis stunned Abernathy, who believed his former SCLC colleague would either endorse him or remain neutral until a potential runoff occurred. A frustrated Abernathy publicly ripped Young for what he viewed as a betrayal, "I didn't think that he had the capacity to stoop to this level. I was surprised and let down, because I have known him as a Christian and sincere individual." Abernathy added that he supported Young in prior campaigns and that

²³⁰ Kruse, *White Flight*, 234, 240-241.

²³¹ Abernathy, 585.

Young “wouldn’t have gotten elected to Congress in the first place without me and the help from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.”²³²

On March 15, 1977, the election unfolded just as political reporters such as Nordan anticipated. Fowler led all candidates with nearly 40 percent of the vote while Lewis took second at about 29 percent and Coverdell settled for third with 21 percent. Abernathy finished a distant fourth with just over four percent of the vote.²³³ Two weeks after his defeat, Abernathy endorsed Lewis in the runoff against Fowler. Although he claimed that race did not factor into his decision to back Lewis, Abernathy conceded that Lewis’s civil rights activism, in which he served “as an apostle of nonviolence” appealed to him more than Fowler’s political experience.²³⁴ Abernathy never again sought public office following the 1977 Fifth District race.

²³² Valerie Price, “Abernathy Blasts Young Endorsement,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 24, 1977, 3A.

²³³ David Morrison, “Fowler and Lewis Plan TV Debate Monday,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 17, 1977, 6A.

²³⁴ David Morrison, “Abernathy Backs Lewis in Fifth District,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 2, 1977, 3A.

CONCLUSION

Ralph David Abernathy experienced the evolution of the civil rights movement over the course of the 1970s. At the outset of the decade, he led brief revivals of the nonviolent protests that worked so well for SCLC in the sixties with the “March Against Repression” and the Butler protests. The former event boosted morale among veteran SCLC activists and an interracial mix of young demonstrators while the latter brought new jobs and expanded the influence of black citizens in local governance in a rural corner of Alabama. Abernathy encountered the frustrations of maintaining the fragile coalition of SCLC activists following the death of the organization’s iconic leader and the shifting attitude toward the movement from white liberals and middle class blacks. In the decade’s later years, Abernathy followed the lead of Andrew Young, Maynard Jackson, and numerous other blacks who pursued their dreams of enacting social change through public office. Over the course of seven years, Abernathy’s participation in the civil rights struggle shifted from leading direct-action demonstrations to campaigning for the opportunity to fight for the creation of new economic opportunities for blacks and impoverished Americans as a public servant.

King’s death caught America off-guard, including SCLC’s staff and the organization’s loyal supporters. Although King insisted on designating a successor three years before he died, the organization’s staff did not prepare Abernathy for the tremendous responsibilities that came with SCLC’s presidency. As a result, when Abernathy became the public face of SCLC, he encountered the external pressure of executing the Poor People’s Campaign and inspiring the American public to support a new phase of the civil rights movement centered on ambitious

economic objectives. In addition, Abernathy inherited a staff mired in dysfunction and he struggled to unite a group of men with strong personalities and large egos, such as Jesse Jackson. Although SCLC's senior staff members agreed with Abernathy's embrace of King's economic goals, his attempt to adopt King's persona failed to resonate with the group: "Martin's shoes were hard to fill," noted Andy Young. "Ralph had been handed the position of Martin's successor because of his genuine loyalty to Martin. I tried to support Ralph, to shore up his weaknesses, but he was frustrated by his inability to be Martin Luther King." Young explained that, "No matter how I urged him to be Ralph Abernathy, the powerful preacher and committed activist, he kept trying to imitate Martin rather than developing his own style of leading SCLC."²³⁵

Furthermore, at the time of Abernathy's ascension to SCLC president Lyndon Johnson lacked the political capital and the desire to push Congress for legislation to meet the wholesale economic restructuring demanded by SCLC. At the outset of the Poor People's Campaign, Johnson told the press of his expectation that Congress would give "due consideration" to SCLC's demands, but he added that "then we expect to get on running the Government as it should be run."²³⁶ Three years earlier, Johnson worked with King to exert enough pressure on Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. Outside of fretting over the possibility of any outbreaks of violence within Resurrection City, Johnson displayed little personal interest in working with Abernathy and SCLC. When Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential election, it marked the beginning of a new era for SCLC and other civil rights organizations as they encountered an administration opposed to both their goals and their methods of protest and civil disobedience.

²³⁵ Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden*, 490.

²³⁶ Ben A. Franklin, "President Voices Concern on March," *The New York Times*, May 4, 1968, 1, 17.

After his contentious meeting with Nixon in the midst of the Charleston strike in 1969, Abernathy never received another audience with the president.

Although Abernathy faced the nearly impossible task of building on King's legacy and ushering SCLC and the black freedom struggle into a new era with more monumental gains than the preceding decade, he made several mistakes that compounded this daunting challenge. After stripping Jesse Jackson of his city manager post at Resurrection City and reassigning him to Chicago, Abernathy should have realized that the organization needed to monitor the brash preacher closely. Instead, Jackson directed Operation Breadbasket with relatively little oversight from SCLC's national headquarters in Atlanta, which resulted in Jackson seizing control over Black Expo and robbing the organization of a potentially valuable source of funds. In addition, after years as the leader of SCLC's Chicago affiliate, Jackson successfully usurped the organization's support within the city's black community when he bolted to form PUSH in 1972. Likewise, Abernathy made the ill-advised decision to engage in a public dispute over donors and fundraising with Coretta Scott King when she created the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Although King's widow turned down Abernathy's offer of a job and an office at SCLC following her husband's death, finding common ground on social issues and engaging in collaborative efforts to raise funds might have benefited both organizations in the 1970s.

Yet the fact that other prominent national civil rights organizations struggled to raise funds and launch campaigns that resonated with the American public and produced meaningful social and political change during the 1970s suggests that SCLC's decline occurred as a result of numerous factors in addition to Abernathy's leadership deficiencies. When Abernathy announced his resignation in 1973, Vernon Jarrett asserted that King emerged as the central

figure in a series of grassroots campaigns “which the media and a celebrity-hungry public converted into a one-man movement.”²³⁷ Yet even King failed to build off the successes of the mid-1960s, which culminated with the Selma-to-Montgomery march three years before his death. For close to a decade after his predecessor’s untimely death, Abernathy fought to advance the cause that King gave his life for. In the end, the obstacles proved insurmountable for King’s “alter ego.”²³⁸

²³⁷ Vernon Jarrett, “Abernathy’s Refusal to Play Messiah Game,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 22, 1973, 50.

²³⁸ *The New York Times*, “Trusted Successor to Dr. King,” April 6, 1968, 25.

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