

Martin Luther King's Dream Turned into "America's Nightmare": Extreme Poverty and Social Inequality

UN Report on U.S. Poverty

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January 7, 2018—Just as the U.S. Congress was preparing to vote on the controversial tax reform, UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston released a damning report on poverty in the United States, on December 15, 2017. Alston, the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, and also a professor at NYC Law School, spent two weeks touring the United States at the invitation of the federal government. He visited California, Alabama, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. Alston contends that 41 million Americans live in poverty, while the Republican tax bill will transfer more wealth to the rich.

In the introduction to his [report](#) he states,

"The proposed tax reform package stakes out America's bid to become the most unequal society in the world, and will greatly increase the already high levels of wealth and income inequality between the richest 1% and the poorest 50% of Americans. The dramatic cuts in welfare, foreshadowed by the President and Speaker Ryan, and already beginning to be implemented by the administration, will essentially shred crucial dimensions of a safety net that is already full of holes. It is against this background that my report is presented."

This article will lay out, from a present and past standpoint, the urgency of the federal government to act in defense of the American people. As Franklin D. Roosevelt demonstrated in 1933, revolutionary change is required. Until federal government intervention occurs, people are going to continue to die needlessly.

Government Responsibility

On Dec. 19 Alston gave an interview to "Democracy Now" on his findings, in which he asserted that tax reform will make the U.S. "World Champion of Extreme Inequality." Alston contended,

"[M]y job is to try to highlight the extent to which people who are living in extreme poverty are jeopardized by government policies. What I see in the United States now is not just a tax reform bill, but a very clear indication by government officials with whom I met, by the Treasury in their analysis, that this is going to be funded in parts by cuts to welfare, to Medicare, Medicaid. And so what you've got is a huge effort to enrich the richest and to impoverish the poorest. That is going to have very dramatic consequences."

“However, it’s not so simple to get people off welfare when the government is not providing the full time quality jobs that are required to make a living,” Alston said. “I spoke with a lot of Walmart employees who are working full time, but who are still eligible for and totally dependent upon food stamps. This is compounded with the precariousness of employment, known as the gig economy.”

Alston posed the paradox:

“The United States is one of the very richest countries in the world. But all of the statistics put it almost at the bottom – whether it’s child mortality rates, longevity of adults, the degree of adequacy of healthcare.”

Among his findings, the United States ranks 36th in the world in access to clean water and sanitation.

“When I go to other countries, the big debate is that ‘We don’t have the money. We can’t afford to provide basic services to these people.’ And yet, in the United States, they’ve got a trillion or a trillion and a half to give to the very rich, but they also don’t have any of the money to provide a basic lifestyle that is human for the 40 million Americans.”

“One of the best quotes I got from an official in West Virginia, where voting rates are very low,” Alston told Goodman.

The official explained to Alston:

“Well, you know, when people are poor, they lose interest. They just don’t believe there’s any point.” “One begins to wonder if that’s a strategy,” Alston commented.

West Virginia now ranks one of the highest in the country in drug overdose deaths.

Alston reported on a meeting in Alabama with a major sewage problem, where a woman spoke of how her house was shot up by white neighbors when she got the right to vote in 1965. When Alston spoke to officials in Alabama and West Virginia of plans to address the sewerage problem, they looked dumbfounded, and said, “I don’t know. “

Alston also addressed the dire situation in Puerto Rico, where people have no electricity and are living in rubble, while unemployment is at depression levels.

Flashback to 1967

In May 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King made a fundamental shift by expanding his focus from African American voting and civil rights, to the economic well-being of all people in America. He laid out his vision for “The Poor People’s Campaign of 1967-68.” Speaking at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) just about a year before his assassination, he said,

I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights ... [W]hen we see that there must be a radical

redistribution of economic and political power, then we see that for the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement.... That after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution... In short, we have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.

In a Sunday sermon, King stated,

“There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today. In a sense it is a triple revolution; technological, a revolution of weaponry, and a human rights revolution. We are coming to Washington in a poor people’s campaign. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty.

On December 4, 1967, the SCLC released a statement by Dr. King detailing his Poor People’s Campaign, announcing that next Spring, that we

“will lead waves of the nation’s poor and disinherited to Washington, D.C. to demand redress of their grievances by the United States government and to secure at least jobs or income for all.” “We hope, with growing confidence, that our campaign in Washington will receive at first a sympathetic understanding across our nation.” “In short, we will be petitioning our government for specific reforms, and we intend to build militant nonviolent actions until that government moves against poverty.”



Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign

“In a sense, we are already at war with and among ourselves. Affluent Americans are locked into suburbs of physical comfort and mental insecurity; poor Americans are locked inside ghettos of material privation and spiritual debilitation; and all of us can almost feel the presence of a kind of social insanity which could lead to national ruin.”

Dr. King implored that it’s not acceptable that “a nation gorged on money while millions of its citizens are denied a good education, adequate health services, decent housing, meaningful employment, and even respect, and are then told to be responsible.”

“The true responsibility for the existence of these deplorable conditions lies ultimately with the larger society, and much of the immediate responsibility for removing the injustices can be laid directly at the door of the federal government.”

“This is the institution which has the power to act, the resources to tap, and the duty to respond.”

“According to the Harris Poll, for example, a substantial majority of Americans believe that we must proceed at once to tear down and rebuild our slums, and a solid majority feel that everyone should have a job,” King said.

The Kennedy Brothers Intervene

In a clear demonstration of government defending the principle of justice, both social and economic, on behalf of the American people, John Kennedy backed up King’s principled views.

In June 1963, during the fight against segregation in Alabama, John F. Kennedy gave the following fourteen minute speech on nationwide TV, at the insistence of his brother Bobby.

“I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. This nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. This nation was founded on the principle that all men are created equal and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are diminished. “

Placing the present situation in historic context, Kennedy continued,

“One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts will not be fully free until all of its citizens are free.”

Martin Luther King declared through tears, that Kennedy’s speech was,

“The most sweeping and forthright ever presented by an American president.”
“Can you believe that a white man not only stepped up to the plate, he hit it over the fence?”

In January 1964, two months after John Kennedy’s assassination, Bobby Kennedy gave a speech in Tokyo, in which he said:

“Dante once said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in time of moral crisis maintain their neutrality... It’s not sufficient to say, well, I don’t think I like the way things are going. We have a responsibility to offer an alternative.”

The speech has been characterized as the point of decision where Bobby Kennedy turned his focus back toward politics.

Soon after his brother's assassination, Bobby said he saw the word "Poverty" scribbled in large letters on one of JFK's notepads. Bobby believed that poverty was his brother's last unfinished agenda. The fight to eliminate poverty came to define both Bobby's campaign for the New York Senate, and his presidential run until June 1968.

The Ugly Truth



Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy

After fifty years, since the righteous call by Martin Luther King and the Kennedy brothers for federal government action to defend human rights by providing a decent living standard for all, the current conditions of life in the United States overall are hideous and unconscionable.

The UN Special Rapporteur's detailed findings are shocking. For the purposes of this article, I will report only the broad statistical findings:

*The youth poverty rate in the United States is the highest across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

A shockingly high number of children in the US live in poverty. In 2016, 18% of children – some 13.3 million – were living in poverty, with children comprising 32.6% of all people in poverty. Child poverty rates are highest in the southern states, with Mississippi, New Mexico at 30% and Louisiana at 29%.

Contrary to the stereotypical assumptions, 31% of poor children are White, 24% are Black, 36% are Hispanic, and 1% are indigenous. When looking at toddlers and infants, 42% of all Black children are poor, 32% of Hispanics, and 37% of Native American infants and toddlers are poor. The figure for Whites is 14%.

*The Stanford Center on Inequality and Poverty ranks the most well-off countries in terms of labor markets, poverty, safety net, wealth inequality, and economic mobility. The United States comes in last of the top 10 most well-off countries, and 18th amongst the top 21.

*In the OECD the U.S. ranks 35th out of 37 in terms of poverty and inequality.

*According to the World Income Inequality Database, the US has the highest Gini rate (measuring inequality) of all Western Countries.

The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality characterizes the US as “a clear and constant outlier in the child poverty league.” U.S. child poverty rates are the highest amongst the six richest countries – Alston contends,

“American exceptionalism was a constant theme in my conversations. But instead of realizing its founders’ admirable commitments, today’s United States has proved itself to be exceptional in far more problematic ways that are shockingly at odds with its immense wealth and its founding commitments to human rights. As a result, contrasts between private wealth and public squalor abound.”

Alston concludes,

“The United States is unique. First of all, it doesn’t recognize what we call social rights at the international level—a right to healthcare, a right to housing, a right to food. The United States is unique in that, saying these are not rights.”

“Second, the issue with elimination of poverty always is around resources: ‘We don’t have the money.’ The United States, again uniquely, has the money. It could eliminate poverty overnight, if it wanted to. What we’re seeing now is the classic – it’s a political choice. Where do you want to put your money, into the rich or into creating a decent society, which will actually be economically more productive than just giving money to those who have a lot?”

The Urgency for Government Action Now

Since 2009, members of the U.S. Congress have filed 5 bills in both houses to restore Glass Steagall. Restoring this Depression-era legislation would significantly rein in the biggest Wall Street banks, and is essential for preparing the way for substantial investment in rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure and industrial base. But, despite the filing of the bipartisan bills, under both Democratic and Republican controlled congresses, the bills never were allowed to come up for a vote. In 2010, Congress passed Dodd-Frank, and protection for the bankers was the order of the day, as the gap between the rich and the poor grew into more hardship and despair for the average citizen.



In September 2011 a movement called “Occupy Wall Street” was founded in New York City to address income inequality. Although the timeliness of the movement gave it international notoriety, it had no real leadership or clear direction. Simple protest [often funded by corporate charities] will not do.

The 2016 U.S. Presidential election demonstrated anti-Wall Street sentiment, and an urgent desire for real job creation, on both ends of the political spectrum. Yet, in January 2018, a Rasmussen poll showed that 60% of Americans believe we are going in the wrong direction. Even a *Wall Street Journal* poll indicated that 74% of Americans agreed with that analysis.

For the last two years, drug overdose deaths have surpassed the total number of casualties during the Vietnam War, as life expectancy continues to drop during that same period.

Nothing has been done by any administration to address and reverse the post-industrial paradigm shift over the last fifty years. As a result 100 million working-age Americans have dropped out of the work force.

What are we doing, America? During the “Golden Era” of the economy, 1933-1965, Americans believed that every generation would be at a higher standard of living than the previous generation. How did we let the hope of the 1960s turned into one of despair?

In 1967, Dr. King said:

“America is at a crossroads of history, and it is critically important for us, as a nation and a society, to choose a new path and move upon it with resolution and courage. It is impossible to under-estimate the crisis we face in America. The stability of a civilization, the potential of free government, and the simple honor of men are at stake.”

Those words couldn’t ring truer today.

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