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[Dr. King's *Other Dream*: Ending Poverty](#)

Dr. Martin Luther King had more than one dream.

Of course, King dreamt of racial reconciliation, and January 20th's inauguration of Barack Obama demonstrates the nation's enormous, albeit inconsistent and incomplete, racial progress.

King also called for making service to others a centerpiece of American life, saying "Everybody can be great because anybody can serve." The Obama inauguration is perfectly honoring that legacy by marking Dr. King's birthday as a national day of community service.

But the King dream that was perhaps the most fiercely opposed during his time -- and has been most overlooked since his death -- was his call to slash poverty in the U.S. and ensure that all Americans had enough to eat. As King said, "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger?"

Ralph Abernathy, who led the Poor People's Campaign in the wake of King's assassination, lamented how white northerners, sympathetic when southern African-Americans were violently attacked for sitting at lunch counters, had notably less sympathy when they tried to dramatize the extent of poverty and hunger nationwide. Said Abernathy: "It was easy enough to blame a southerner for barring his restaurant door...but who was the northern white man to blame for nationwide hunger, except himself, and who would have had to pay for the cure?"

Ironically, had America ever chosen to do so, it could have wiped out domestic poverty and hunger far more rapidly than it could have achieved King's goals of racial equality or world peace. As King also said, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will."

Although conservatives have convinced most Americans that the War on Poverty was a failure, that's just not true. Between 1960 and 1973, as a result of both broad-based economic

growth and government anti-poverty initiatives, the nation's poverty rate was cut in half, and more than 16 million previously poor Americans entered the middle-class. While the Great Society surely had flaws and excesses, it succeeded spectacularly in achieving its main goal of reducing poverty.

But the nation lost the political will to continue fighting the War on Poverty, and its programs were subsequently under-funded, gutted, or abandoned entirely. Our country's economic policies fostered the replacement of lifetime living-wage jobs with temporary employment at poverty wages. By 2007, fully 37.2 million Americans lived below the meager federal poverty line, 14 million more than in 1973. Childhood poverty now costs our nation's economy \$500 billion per year, equivalent to four percent of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product, according to a study by the Center for American Progress.

Is the answer to simply resurrect and re-fund all the Great Society Programs? No. Since the nature of poverty and the American economy have changed since the 1960's, our anti-poverty strategies must also change.

A good place to start would be finally meeting a central demand of King's Poor People Movement: enacting a federal nutrition safety net robust enough to end domestic hunger. The federal government currently sponsors more than a dozen food assistance programs, but each has its own application and eligibility determination system, and each serves too few people, with too little in benefits. President-elect Obama has already pledged to end domestic child hunger (which now affects more than 12 million American children) by 2015. To achieve that goal, the President and Congress should streamline the existing nutrition programs and use modern technologies to allow eligible families to access all of them with one application, which would save money through decreased bureaucracy. The money saved should be pumped directly into increased food benefits.

Beyond that, we need an entirely new framework for addressing domestic poverty. While our political leaders still tend to choose ideological sides -- and flatly declare that either faltering economics or personal irresponsibility alone is responsible for poverty -- that's a false choice. Increased government support, economic growth, community involvement, *and* a focus on personal responsibility are *all* needed to solve the problem. The country should enact an "Aspiration Empowerment Agenda" that gives all families the opportunity to advance their dreams through hard work and responsible choices, enabling them to earn, learn, and save their way out of poverty.

True, this will take additional government spending. Since the most fundamental feature of poverty is a lack of money, trying to fight poverty without money is like trying to fight a drought without water. But no matter the price tag, it won't come close to the dismal cost of doing nothing. If we truly want to honor Dr King's full legacy, and if President Obama wants to start building his own in a practical and immensely meaningful way, the time for new action against poverty is now.