

USA: 'A Freedom Budget for All' - From 1966 to today

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Three years after the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a number of its core organizers projected a new stage of the struggle for equality — expanding and deepening it, creating the economic and social foundations needed to realize Martin Luther King's dream. Their program, "A Freedom Budget for All Americans," was issued by the A. Philip Randolph Institute in fall 1966. In his foreword, King called the document "a moral commitment to the fundamental principles on which this nation was founded." Chances are you've never heard of it. [1]

Even in the much-abridged version reproduced in the appendix to Paul Le Blanc's and Michael D. Yates's *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today* (Monthly Review, distributed by New York University Press), the proposal looks incredibly ambitious. It mapped out a course of structural reforms leading to full employment, universal access to adequate education and health care, and cleaner air and water. And the pace of change it projected was brisk. The plan could be in full effect by 1975, just in time for the bicentennial to open on a suitably confident and optimistic note.

The authors (Le Blanc is an associate professor at La Roche College in Pittsburgh, Yates an associate editor of Monthly Review) recount the genesis and logic of the Freedom Budget — as well as how it was derailed, with some of its advocates soon to find themselves on the opposite sides of various late 1960s barricades. With the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington looming, I interviewed Le Blanc by e-mail about the history and relevance of this mostly forgotten postscript to the event.

(About 20 years ago, Le Blanc and I collaborated in editing a volume of writings by C.L.R. James. Reviewing his latest book would be logrolling, but asking him questions about it counts as continuing my education.)

Scott McLemee

Scott McLemee: Suppose you had the attention of everyone in the U.S for a couple of minutes to try to persuade as much of the public as possible that the Freedom Budget, so little remembered now, deserves another look. What's would you say?

Paul Le Blanc: There is a detailed plan, worked out by prominent economists such as Leon Keyserling and others, endorsed by over 200 prominent academics, religious leaders, trade unionists, and civil rights figures, showing how we can end poverty and provide jobs for all — but it can only be implemented if we mobilize a powerful democratic struggle to make it so.

Q: How did you become aware of the Freedom Budget?

A: I became aware of the Freedom Budget when it was first put forward, back in the fall of 1966. I was a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Freedom Budget was being promoted by our former “parent” organization, the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), a left-liberal and moderate-socialist think tank and educational entity. Most of us in SDS felt we were far more radical than the LID, but I was very drawn to the Freedom Budget, which emphasized the link between racial justice for African Americans and economic justice for all people in our society.

The Freedom Budget’s most eloquent spokespeople — A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr. — all had a powerful impact on my thinking. The promise of the Freedom Budget, to end poverty and unemployment throughout the United States within a ten-year period, greatly impressed me, especially because with detailed charts and graphs and statistics, it was shown how this could actually be done. Imagine if that goal had been achieved by the end of the 1970s! Also, as I taught courses on U.S. history year after year, it made sense — when I discussed the civil rights movement with my students — to discuss that link that King and the others saw between racial and economic justice, and to tell them something about the Freedom Budget. Recent developments have caused the Freedom Budget to shift from being a memory of my youth, and a topic for classroom discussion, to something more urgent.

Q: What made you and your co-author think that the time had come to try to revive interest in the Freedom Budget? The ultimately directionless nature of the Occupy movement? The vacuum left by “Change You Can Believe In”? Something else?

A: As living standards in the United States increasingly sagged over the years — under the impact of so-called “de-industrialization” and globalization, Reaganomics and austerity — and as racism persisted in part because the bottom 80 percent of the population were competing for scarce resources, it seemed to me that the unfulfilled promise of the Freedom Budget had greater relevance than ever. Two developments in 2008 sharpened this for me. First, the fact that Obama’s campaign rhetoric (which seemed to echo the promise of King and Rustin and Randolph) was resonating among a majority of the American people. Second, the Great Recession highlighted the intensified need for something like the Freedom Budget.

Instead, there were bailouts for the billionaires — but the needs of the great majority of people cried out for a new version of the Freedom Budget. This underlying reality is what animated the massive protests of the Occupy movement. I participated in that movement, and I don’t fault it for being “directionless.” Masses of people were mad as hell and not inclined to take it anymore, and the Occupy movement appropriately focused attention on the fact that the top 1 percent of the rich and powerful were racking up greater wealth and power at our expense. This helped to generate a massive discussion about “where we go from here.” And it seemed to me that now was the time for more and more people to look at the Freedom Budget again.

Q: I’m struck by how casually the Budget takes it as a given that a full employment is possible — and that a large share of the public, maybe even a majority, might support it. (Neither possibility is mooted much now, despite Paul Krugman’s best efforts.) Is it fair to say that confidence reflects the memory of the New Deal and wartime job creation? Or were the architects of the plan counting more on the momentum of the civil rights movement to push things forward?

A: I think both things are true. The primary architect of the Freedom Budget was Keyserling, a left-leaning Keynesian who had played a central role both in developing New Deal legislation (such as the Social Security Act and the National Labor Relations Act) and in helping to oversee the wartime

economy. He went on to play a central role in the Council of Economic Advisers under President Harry Truman from 1946 to 1953 and he was a longtime advocate of policies that would guarantee full employment. The aura of the New Deal continued to attract a majority of Americans into the 1960s. At the same time, Randolph, Rustin and King were convinced that the moral power and alignment of forces represented by the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom could be a key to helping mobilize massive popular support for the Freedom Budget — particularly in the wake of the victories of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act that brought an end to the Jim Crow system.

Q: You sometimes hear people say that MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech needs to be put in storage for a while — that it’s become too familiar, and too commonly regarded as morally uplifting rather than really challenging. What’s the connection between that speech and the Budget? One is endlessly replayed and the other all but forgotten, but your book suggests they’re related.

A: Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech cannot be comprehended unless we understand it as the culmination of a March for Jobs and Freedom, linking economic justice with racial justice. From his college days in the late 1940s until his death in 1968, King was deeply committed to overcoming poverty and economic exploitation no less than to overcoming racism. He came to see the struggles to overcome economic and racial oppression as inseparable. In addressing the AFL-CIO convention in 1961, he repeated something he had emphasized more than once over the years — projecting “a dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.”

In his preface to the summary version of the Freedom Budget in 1966, King argued that “there is no way merely to find work, or adequate housing, or quality-integrated schools for Negroes alone.” In his explanation of the Freedom Budget’s meaning, he underscored the underlying assumptions animating the organizers of the 1963 March: “We shall eliminate slums for Negroes when we destroy ghettos and build new cities for all. We shall eliminate unemployment for Negroes when we demand full and fair employment for all.” This was part of the meaning of the assertion in his “I Have a Dream” speech that many whites “have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.”

Q: A common narrative of the 1960s is that the spirit of the March on Washington (or, in some tellings of the story, the New Deal coalition) had disappeared by the late 1960s — destroyed by some combination of Black Power, white backlash, and ever-sharper polarization over the Vietnam War. The Freedom Budget was the shared vision of people like Stokely Carmichael and Tom Kahn who, two years later, would have been yelling at each other. Where does your book stand in relation to that narrative? To put it another way, does it make sense to think of the Budget as the last chance for something different? As a casualty of developments that might have gone otherwise? Or was there something inevitable about how things played out?

A: In the early 1960s, Stokely Carmichael and Tom Kahn were political comrades, closely associated both with Bayard Rustin and with the Socialist Party. Kahn’s role and influence in the civil rights movement of that time, quite significant in important ways, is attested to in Carmichael’s own autobiography. They diverged sharply in 1964 and increasingly over the next few years. Kahn and those who remained politically closest to him (for example Rustin) had concluded that the Democratic Party was the pathway to political relevance. They also increasingly identified the working class and organized labor movement with the person of the relatively bureaucratic and conservative AFL-CIO President George Meany. And they went along with (or at least didn’t organize opposition to) the Vietnam war, which was promoted by the Democratic Party leadership and fully

supported by Meany.

I consider this development to have been tragic in regard to what Kahn and Rustin had been and might have been, and also incredibly damaging for the prospects of the Freedom Budget. Most of the Democrats saw the Freedom Budget as too radical, especially given the spending priorities associated with the Vietnam war. Meany himself never endorsed the Freedom Budget, and the bulk of those around him were not inclined to mobilize the ranks of labor on its behalf — only the more radical elements in the unions were inclined to go in that direction.

In contrast to this, Martin Luther King concluded that building opposition to the war was inseparable from also advancing the struggle for economic justice, and my account coincides with that approach. Rustin insisted that it would have been economically possible to realize the Freedom Budget while maintaining the U.S. war in Vietnam, but even he concluded that the war probably destroyed the political possibility of winning the struggle for the Freedom Budget. It can certainly be argued that the Freedom Budget was “the last chance for something different” and that it was a casualty of developments that might have gone otherwise. But it seems to me that, given the actual structures of power, it could not have been achieved through the kind of dependence on the Democratic Party that was built into the strategic orientation of its architects.

My co-author Michael Yates and I have pretty much concluded that its implementation, certainly under today’s circumstances, will not be possible without a major shift in consciousness and power relations. This would mean that the political and economic decision-making power of at least a majority of the 99 percent replaces that of the wealthiest 1 percent.

Q: It’s not as if it would do much good to reissue the Budget now with the numbers adjusted for almost 50 years of inflation. At the same time, it’s hard to picture anything like it being drafted now, and certainly not with anything like the Budget’s backing and support. Do you see some reason to think a Freedom Budget 2.0 is possible? Otherwise the book seems more like an invitation to counterfactual history than anything else.

A: For me there are three major reasons for this book on the Freedom Budget. First of all, as a historian I felt compelled to tell people “these things happened” and to share what seems to me fascinating information on the people, the ideas, and the struggles associated with the Freedom Budget. Second, looking at this neglected chapter in our history, and doing so in some depth, sheds new light on the history of the civil rights movement, the history of racism and anti-racism, the dynamics of political and social movements that shaped our country. There are insights into our present life and future possibilities that can be gained by looking at the thinking, the efforts, the triumphs and defeats of the remarkable people who were engaged with the Freedom Budget.

This leads to the third reason. Michael Yates and I are inspired by the better, more abundant, more democratic future that the Freedom Budget was reaching for. We believe such a future could be possible, and that a growing number of people — given the multiple crises afflicting our society and world — will be looking for how we might get to such a better future. Changes in the world over the past four decades necessitate, we think, a new version of the Freedom Budget, and we offer some thought about what this might look like.

If what is happening in the world results in more and more people in thinking about and struggling for a better future, the Freedom Budget idea could gain a new relevance. We see this book feeding into such a process.

P.S.

* Inside Higher Ed, August 21, 2013:

<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/08/21/interview-paul-le-blanc-freedom-budget-all-americans>

Footnotes

[1] The original pamphlet is available in PDF here:

<http://archive.org/details/freedomBudgetForAllAmericansBudgetingOurResources1966-1975To>