

## Building a Ghetto

By Richard J. Margolis

**T**HE WHITE taxi driver who took me to Resurrection City said they were a bad omen, "those jigs on the mall. Ya notice how cold it's been since they come. Ya think that's an accident? They brought a black cloud with 'em." Well, there *was* a chill in the air.

But the poor are asking for nothing the rest of us do not already take for granted. Only a nation of gluttons, a people who eat to kill time, could have allowed matters to deteriorate so horribly.

Everything being done here insists that we at last recognize this. These people have, as a reporter remarked to me, "the arrogance of poverty," and Resurrection City is their biggest put-on yet—a grim joke that begins at the Lincoln Memorial, creeps across the long mall toward the chalk-white Washington Monument and ends. . . . But no one knows where it will end. New busloads of sufferers arrive daily. Many have nothing in their stomachs; some have violence in their hearts.

"If we run out of space," announced Jesse Jackson, the poor people's city manager, "we can build apartments. We can go up at least as high as the Monument." The reporters dutifully wrote it down. It is impossible nowadays to dream up a miracle white people will doubt, provided it resembles a plague.

Resurrection City seems a little of both. One's first impression of it,

---

**RICHARD J. MARGOLIS**, a free-lance writer, specializes in urban affairs.

glimpsed through a taxi window, is that of a thoughtfully arranged slum: row upon row of plywood A-frames, mostly unpainted, and lots of little children playing on the muddy, unpaved "streets." Like all well-planned slums, the site is miles away from the nearest shopping facility. There is a shortage of milk for the children, and of hot food and cigarettes for the adults. Officials of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) are fond of saying the new shacks are much superior to those the poor people left behind. Actually, they are no better and no worse. They are cold, crowded and lacking in all the essential amenities, including plumbing.

I punished the cabby for his bigoted language by giving him a very small tip, thus reconciling middle-class liberalism with middle-class miserliness. Outside Resurrection City the scene was confused. Hundreds of people, apparently tourists, were standing around staring at each other; buses kept crawling in and out of the parking area; volunteers, mostly white and female, were signing up at a volunteer booth, and in another booth nearby a bearded black man from San Francisco was displaying paintings of Martin Luther King Jr. (King's picture was everywhere—on placards, and on buttons youths were hawking for a dollar apiece. He has suffered the fate of martyrs, become a souvenir.)

The din was general, dominated by screaming jets taking off from National airport and by patient or panicky voices booming over the

public address system: "We have a vehicle that is willing to take 50 men and women that wants to take showers. . . . Attention all mothers who want to have their children housed at night—there are homes available for 60 children. . . . One female volunteer, please, one female volunteer. . . . We need shovels at the back of the dining tent. . . . We need 12 marshalls immediately. . . . We need able-bodied men. . . . Does anyone know the whereabouts of the keys to the warehouse? This is urgent."

Resurrection City is entirely surrounded by a wooden snow-fence, about as high as a man. It has a single, narrow gate for pedestrians and it is not easy for a rich man to get through. The man at the gate was wearing a blue armband and carrying a bullhorn through which he finally addressed us outsiders. "If you're just a sightseer, you can go home now." I showed him my press card, but he said I was too late, I had missed "the press hours."

I decided to circle the perimeter of the City on foot, and was soon joined by a German photographer named Peter Munzberg. He seemed stunned. "This smells like revolution," he muttered. "It reminds me of the days before the Nazis came to power." I explained that this was a *peaceful* revolution, that the poor people were seeking redress through legitimate democratic channels. He was not reassured.

We walked eastward toward the Monument, the fence and the new City on our right, the long, beautiful

Reflection Pool on our left. Two children were dangling their bare feet in the pool. On the other side of the fence a little girl scooted by on her tricycle and smiled up at me. It was the only smile I got in Resurrection City.

A-frames make good billboards. Most of the shacks bore such legends as "Soul House," "Black Is Beauty," "We Shall Overcome" and "Johnson Can't Jail Us All." One shack proclaimed in red paint:

THIS IS THE GREAT SOCIETY  
WAR—HATE—POVERTY  
THE AMERICAN DREAM

Peter was pointing his camera over the fence and clicking it rapidly when four young blacks shouted at him to stop. "This ain't no zoo," one of them said. "You can't make a spectacle of us." Peter looked puzzled. "But don't you *want* to be a spectacle?" he asked. "Isn't that why you are here?" The reply was unprintable.

I returned to Resurrection City late that night. This time my taxi driver was black, bourgeois to his fingertips and timidly curious about "those folks in there." He parked and then we trekked along the fence together, impressed by the silence emanating from the encampment and by the beauty of the illuminated obelisk beyond. The camp was lit here and there by fires in trash barrels, and people were huddled near them for warmth. Dark figures wrapped in blankets seemed to float by like Hollywood Indians. (A few real Indians were supposed to be there, too, but I didn't see them.) From time to time a pair of sentries patrolling the borders shined flashlights in our eyes—the cops teach well—and told us to keep our distance.

Thanks to my black walking partner, I was able to chat with a couple of residents over the fence. One was a large lady from Chicago who was busy picking at a huge pile of clothes spread on a table near the gate. "The Lord provides for those who provides for themselves," she informed us. She was going back the next

morning to her husband and her 13 children in Chicago. "It's lonely here," she said, "not what I expected. Nobody helps each other." It is true that Resurrection City is not yet a community. Some no doubt feel more alienated here than in their previous slum.

The other resident I talked to that night was a young man from Milwaukee. He had spent last year marching in white neighborhoods, agitating for a fair housing ordinance. "It took us 267 days to get it," he said. "It may take us 267 years to get what we want in Washington. I'm here to stay." He was a man without illusions—tough, weary, determined. A black Bazarov.

**T**HE NEXT DAY was gloomy and cold. "Press hours" were from 12:30 to 2 P.M. While waiting to get in I watched the women rummage through the clothes pile. They seemed to be looking for something that wasn't there, turning everything over and putting everything back. A man with an armband gave me a hard stare. "Mister, what are you looking at?" I retreated, remembering Richard Wright's story about his bellhop days in a Southern hotel. He had delivered a bottle to a room in which a naked white couple was disporting, and he hadn't been able to take his eyes off the woman. "What are you looking at, boy?"

There were about 600 press people waiting to get in, and we all gathered around Jesse Jackson for a briefing. He was confident, affable. He talked about the four stages of the Poor People's Campaign—information, education, negotiation, and demonstration—and I gathered that after a week of trying the first three they had already entered the fourth. He spoke of sleeping on suburban lawns, "where the grass is softer." He mentioned the difficulties of being non-violent "in a country that teaches violence on television and in Vietnam." Then he lectured us on our responsibility to write the truth about Resurrection City so that the

American people will understand what they must do. "Don't harp on freakish manifestations," he said. He called for questions, and a reporter raised his hand. "Sir, what advice do you have for the people of Canada?"

It began to drizzle the moment we came through the gate. I walked slowly, deeper and deeper into the City, past the Communications Booth, past some children playing kickball, past a shack with flowers in cardboard milk cartons flanking the front door. Twice I stopped to interview and twice was told to move on. "Get the fuck out of here, whitey."

In front of a tent labeled "Child Care" a youthful WASP reporter was arguing with a half dozen blacks. They wore green jackets that said "Pride, Inc. . . . Rat Patrol."

"But, look, I'm on *your* side," said the reporter.

"You wanna write something?" one of the green jackets said. "Just write that we ain't got nothing to say to you."

I started to write down the overheard argument in my notebook. "Hey, what's that guy doing? Don't let him do that." In a second the center of gravity had shifted to me, and the other reporter had vanished.

A green jacket tried to grab my notes. We had a brief tug of war. "Don't touch the notes," I said, hugging them to my chest. I considered going limp but instead I grew stiffer. Then someone held my arms and someone else got my notes. They were torn and thrown on the ground. "We ought to make you clean up the trash," I was told. "You're messing up our place."

The taxi turned into the circular driveway of my hotel, and the black, liveried doorman hopped over and opened the door. He was grinning. "Yes, *sir*," he said, "it seems like the rain don't want to stop." It was an old, familiar game—the door held open, the smile locked tight—and we played it. We had in common only these threadbare habits and the falling rain.