



# POOR PEOPLE'S MORAL BUDGET: EVERYBODY HAS THE RIGHT TO LIVE

Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival  
Institute for Policy Studies  
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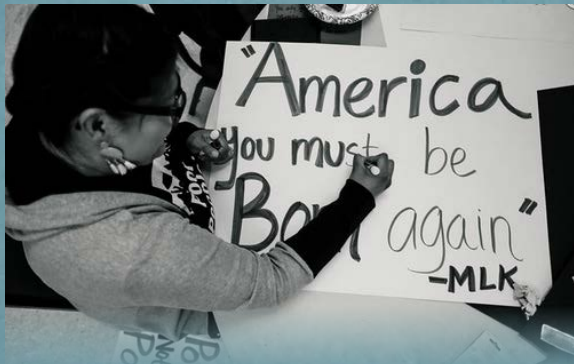
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# KEY FINDINGS



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In April 2018, the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival released a Moral Agenda and Declaration of Fundamental Rights. The demands contained within that document present a comprehensive response to the systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism, and war economy plaguing our country today. For the 140 million people who are poor, or one emergency away from being poor, we know these demands are necessary. This Poor People’s Moral Budget asks, given the resources of our society, whether these demands are also possible. Our answer is a resounding yes.

In the seven sections of the Moral Budget, we look at policies and investments for seven critical areas of the Poor People’s Moral Agenda: 1) democracy and equal protection under the law; 2) domestic tranquility; 3) peace and the common defense; 4) life and health; 5) the planet; 6) our future; and 7) an equitable economy. In each case, we’ve found that our nation has abundant resources to meet the demands of the poor, and to address the widespread and systemic injustices we face. In contrast, the current realities of voter suppression, low and inconsistent wages, insecure access to health care and other basic needs, wealth inequality, war, and climate change are far costlier than we have been led to believe.

This Budget shows that it is possible to invest our resources in the ways demanded by this Campaign and our moral and Constitutional values: to establish justice, domestic tranquility, security, and the general welfare for all. It shows, too, just how wasteful systemic injustice is. The abundance of our society will grow even greater when we stop investing in maintaining injustice to benefit the few, and turn instead to policies based on the needs of the many.

## OVERALL FINDINGS

The United States has abundant resources for an economic revival that will move towards establishing a moral economy. This report identifies:

- \$350 billion in annual military spending cuts that would make the nation and the world more secure;
- \$886 billion in estimated annual revenue from fair taxes on the wealthy, corporations, and Wall Street; and
- Billions more in savings from ending mass incarceration, addressing climate change, and meeting other key campaign demands.

The below comparisons demonstrate that policymakers have always found resources for their true priorities. It is critical that policymakers redirect these resources to establish justice and to prioritize the general welfare instead. The abundant wealth of this nation is produced by millions of people, workers, and families in this country and around the world. The fruits of their labor should be devoted to securing their basic needs and creating the conditions for them to thrive.

At the same time, policymakers should not tie their hands with “pay-as-you-go” restrictions that require every dime of new spending to be offset with expenditure cuts or new revenue, especially given the enormous long-term benefits of most of our proposals. The cost of inaction is simply too great.

1. **Investments in Democracy and Equal Protection under the Law.** Enfranchising voters, protecting our elections, and reforming our immigration system are moral necessities, and would yield huge economic benefits.

- Transitioning to automatic, online voter registration would cost just \$150 million per year for five years. That's less than the \$173 million the top two individual political donors contributed in the 2016 election.<sup>1</sup>
- There is a solid economic case for the moral imperative to expand democratic rights. For example, restricting the voting and civil rights of the formerly incarcerated has cost the state of Florida an estimated \$365 million per year due to administrative and court costs and increased recidivism.
- Comprehensive immigration reform would allow millions of families to live in security — and result in a net gain for the federal budget. One immigration proposal in Congress would cost the federal government around \$26 billion per year, but those costs would be more than balanced by the \$46 billion per year in increased revenues from income and payroll taxes.

2. **Investments in Domestic Tranquility.** True domestic tranquility is only possible when our nation meets the needs of its people and ensures access to good jobs and adequate incomes for people who aren't working. Lifting poverty wages, restoring the safety net, and guaranteed employment rebuilding our infrastructure would put trillions of dollars every year into the pockets of those who need and deserve it most.

- A \$15 federal minimum wage enacted immediately would raise pay for 49 million workers by a combined \$328 billion per year. At \$22 per hour, 83 million workers would get \$1 trillion more in pay. These pay raises dwarf the \$7.1 billion in “tax cut bonuses” employers gave U.S. workers in 2018.<sup>2</sup>
- As an immediate measure, restoring Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to previous funding levels would provide a modicum of relief to poor families who deserve a fully functional safety net. TANF has not been adjusted for inflation since the Clinton administration, which in 2019 puts the program \$8.9 billion under its 1996 level. Restoring that \$8.9 billion would cost less than the roughly \$14 billion the United States spends each year on increased border patrols, deportations, and incarceration.
- An annual wealth tax on just the 75,000 richest U.S. households would generate \$275 billion per year — more than enough to put 2.5 million people to work fixing our public infrastructure.

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1 “Top Individual Contributors: All Federal Contributions,” Center for Responsive Politics, accessed May 21, 2019, <https://www.opensecrets.org/overview/topindivs.php?cycle=2016&view=fc>.

2 “Trump Tax Cuts,” Americans for Tax Fairness, accessed May 21, 2019, <https://americansfortaxfairness.org/issues/trumptaxcuttruths/>

**3. Investments in an Equitable Economy.** Fair taxes on the wealthy, corporations, and Wall Street could pay for a substantial share of the proposals in this report.

- Fair taxes on the wealthy, corporations, and Wall Street could generate as much as \$886 billion per year in revenue to meet urgent social and environmental needs.<sup>3</sup>
- Capital gains taxes on fortunes passed on to heirs would raise an estimated \$78 billion per year — approximately the estimated cost of giving every American child a modest savings account at birth that would earn interest and grow, providing a nest egg for education or to buy a home.

**4. Investments in Life and Health.** In a country with as much wealth as ours, no person should suffer or die for lack of adequate health care. And a system that covers everyone would actually save money.

- Expanding Medicaid in the 14 states that have not yet taken advantage of Affordable Care Act subsidies for Medicaid would cost the federal government \$25 billion in the first year — roughly the amount the Pentagon awards one company, Boeing, in military contracts each year.<sup>4</sup>
- Even better, by eliminating bloat and negotiating better prices, a publicly funded single-payer system would save money overall. One analysis estimates the savings at 9% over current costs, saving businesses and individuals as much as \$310 billion per year, even as coverage is expanded to all.<sup>5</sup>
- An investment of an additional \$31 billion in the Indian Health Service would begin to redress the five and a half year difference in life expectancy between Native Americans and the United States average, and would cost less than half of our current spending on wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>6</sup>

**5. Investments in Our Future.** Simply restoring pre-2018 corporate tax rates, along with a tiny tax on Wall Street trades, would easily cover childcare support, free college, and other investments we've failed to make in our children.

- An investment of \$24.4 billion per year in K-12 schools and teachers could start to boost academic performance among poor and struggling children for about the same cost as a wall at the southern border.<sup>7</sup>

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3 If policymakers adopted all of the proposals identified in this section, revenue estimates would need to be adjusted to account for interactions between the reforms.

4 "Spending by Transaction," USA Spending, accessed May 22, 2019, [https://www.usaspending.gov/#/keyword\\_search/Boeing](https://www.usaspending.gov/#/keyword_search/Boeing).

5 Robert Pollin et al., "Economic Analysis of Medicare for All," Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, November 30, 2018, <https://www.peri.umass.edu/publication/item/1127-economic-analysis-of-medicare-for-all>.

6 "Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request," Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, March 5, 2019, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020\\_Budget\\_Request\\_Overview\\_Book.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf).

7 Andrew DePietro, "The Real Cost of the Border Wall As The Senate Votes to Kill Trump's National State of Emergency," Yahoo! Finance, March 14, 2019, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/real-cost-trump-border-wall-195830968.html>.

- Universal early learning and childcare support would require \$100 billion per year. That's substantially less than the \$130 billion per year that could be generated if we merely restored the corporate tax rate to the pre-2018 level of 35%.
- For every \$1 invested in early childhood education, society would gain \$7.30 due to reduced poverty, lower incarceration rates, and better health outcomes.
- The federal and state shares of providing free public college would cost about \$70 billion per year. That's less than the revenue that could be generated through a tiny tax on transactions by wealthy, high-speed Wall Street traders.
- A study of public higher education in California found that for every \$1 invested in public colleges and universities, the state gained \$4.50 due to reduced poverty, arrests and incarcerations, and higher tax revenues.

**6. Investments in our Planet.** Investing in a clean energy transition — and in basic resource rights like clean water — would create jobs, save trillions, and address the needs of the poor and people of color who are already feeling the worst effects of climate change.

- Climate change is a cause of massive human suffering: forced migration, food insecurity, and higher rates of infection. In 2010, 400,000 deaths worldwide could already be attributed to climate change. By 2030, that number is projected to reach 700,000.
- Inaction on climate change could cost up to 15.7% of GDP per year.<sup>8</sup> That's the equivalent of wiping out \$3.3 trillion from the U.S. economy — the rough equivalent of five Great Recessions, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.<sup>9</sup>
- Addressing climate change with a \$200 billion per year investment in a clean energy transition would reduce the damage to GDP while creating 2.7 million net new jobs.
- Investing \$37.2 billion a year in water infrastructure would create up to 945,000 jobs while providing safe drinking water to thousands of communities that don't have it. That's less than what the Pentagon awarded to just one corporation — Lockheed Martin — for military contracts in 2018.<sup>10</sup>

**7. Investments in Peace and the Common Defense.** Shifting our foreign policy toward peace and diplomacy, and away from military-first responses, would make our world safer – and put hundreds of billions back on the table for security at home.

- We could save as much as \$350 billion per year by cutting current Pentagon spending for fighting endless wars, maintaining a worldwide network of 800 military bases, stoking dangerous arms races, and subsidizing for-profit corporate contractors, and our military budget would still be larger than that of China, Russia, and Iran combined.

8 Solomon Hsiang et al., "Estimating Economic Damage from Climate Change in the United States," *Science* 356, no. 6345, (2017): 1362-1369, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aal4369>.

9 Calculation by authors based on GDP figures from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

10 "Top 100 Defense Contractors 2018: U.S. Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2018," Forecast International, <http://www.fi-aeroweb.com/Top-100-Defense-Contractors.html>.



- Ending mass incarceration could drastically reduce the \$179 billion per year that our nation spends on policing, courts, and private prison operators. A one-quarter reduction in spending on mass incarceration could fund \$44 billion per year in investments in a housing trust fund to build, maintain, and preserve affordable rental homes.

These comparisons illustrate that we don't lack for resources at all. The problem is that we invest our resources in priorities that fail to meet the needs of millions of people whose potential is being thwarted, whose lives are being minimized, and who are dying unnecessarily through violence and neglect. These misplaced priorities are not only damaging our social fabric, they are moving us towards a fundamentally unstable economy.

The policies presented in the Moral Budget begin to move us towards a different reality, where we can realize the full potential of our most valuable resource — the strength, genius, and creativity of our fellow human beings. Investing in these demands will fundamentally reorient our economy to be on track with our deepest moral values, and build a new foundation for prosperity for all.

There is a far better way forward, and it is within our reach.

# INTRODUCING

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# THE POOR PEOPLE'S MORAL BUDGET



# INTRODUCING THE POOR PEOPLE'S MORAL BUDGET: EVERYBODY'S GOT THE RIGHT TO LIVE

BY REV. DR. WILLIAM J. BARBER II AND REV. DR. LIZ THEOHARIS

*“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the General Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America” – Preamble of the Constitution*

*“And let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” – Amos 5:24*

*“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” – Luke 4:18*

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As we have traveled around these yet to be United States of America, from Appalachia to Alabama, California to the Carolinas, Mississippi to Maine, the delta of the south to the coal miner's home in Kentucky, we have seen the pain and heard the cry of every race, creed, color, and sexuality that our moral values and economic policies are out of sync. Indeed, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has suggested, our state and national budgets prove that many of our elected leaders and their lobbyists treasure the military, corporate tax cuts, and welfare for the wealthy while they give rugged individualism, shame and blame, unfair wages, and a shredded social safety net to the poor.

This is a willful act of policy violence at a time when there are 140 million poor and low-income people – over 43.5% of the population – in the richest country in the history of the world. This includes 39 million children, 74.2 million women, 60.4% or 26 million Black people, 64.1% or 38 million Latinx people, 40.8% or 8 million Asian people, 58.9% or 2.14 million Native and Indigenous people, and 33.5% or 66 million White people. Increasing the harm on these 140 million, since 2010, there has been an onslaught of attacks on voting rights in state legislatures: racialized voter suppression and gerrymandering have helped to smuggle state leaders into office, who then turn around and pass policies that hurt the poor and marginalized. Life-giving social programs are being eviscerated to make way for increased spending on war, militarizing our border, and tax payouts to Wall Street.

As clergy who minister and work alongside poor people of every race, creed, age, gender, and sexuality across America, we know these realities pre-date the Trump administration. Income inequality and wealth disparity have increased under Republicans and Democrats over the past four decades, but now there is increased policy disdain for the poor. Because of this, poor people and moral leaders have been calling for a Poor People's Campaign for a long time.

From Mother's Day, May 2018, to the Summer Solstice, June 2018, thousands of people in forty states committed themselves to a season of direct action to launch the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. For six consecutive weeks, impacted people, moral leaders and activists gathered in state capitols across the country and in Washington D.C. for nonviolent moral fusion direct action, weekly mass meetings, teach ins, and cultural events. The result was over two hundred actions in forty days with over 5,000 people presenting themselves for nonviolent civil disobedience, tens of thousands witnessing and millions of people following online and through social media—the largest and most expansive wave of nonviolent civil disobedience in 21st-century America.

More than just a series of rallies and actions, a new model of organizing has been catalyzed in this country. From Alaska to Arkansas, the Bronx to the border, people are coming together to organize moral outrage around poverty, racism, ecological devastation and militarism into a transforming force, to turn the poor into agents of change rather than objects of history. In forty states, there are coordinating committees building bridges between communities who have often been pitted against one another. In every region of the country, there are poor people and people of faith and conscience uniting and organizing across lines of race, religion, age, geography, gender and sexuality, political party, and other lines of division.

Before the launch, we were told that our vision was larger than our reach. Friends and allies cautioned that we should focus on a single issue, as if people's lives could be compartmentalized. While we have heard this same argument for years, politicians and corporations have waged war on voting rights, health care, housing, education, water, land, climate, and communities. Then they've taken their bloated military budgets and used our bodies to wage war abroad.

But this is not the time for an incremental campaign; rather, we need one that is willing to confront the rotten structures that perpetuate these injustices and build new and unsettling alliances. In Missouri, hundreds of young Black, White, and Latinx low-wage workers and parents linked up with brigades of octogenarians to stage some of the largest actions in the country. Apache leaders set off from Oak Flats in Arizona and caravanned across the entire nation bringing diverse Indigenous and Native tribes into the Campaign. In California, undocumented folks in Los Angeles connected with homeless organizers in Salinas and policy experts in Sacramento. In Mississippi, families struggling with poverty and the suppression of voting rights rallied together, even when dogs and extremists attempted to intimidate them. In Wisconsin, public school teachers, low-wage workers, undocumented immigrants, and peace activists convened on the state capitol. In North Carolina, families impacted by the lack of Medicaid expansion, coal ash, and homelessness all linked arms to declare “fight poverty, not the poor” together. Nic Smith, a fast-food worker with the Fight for 15 in Virginia declared at a rally on Capitol Hill, “I'm poor, I'm White, and I'm here. This hillbilly is joining other poor people of all colors, all sexualities, all religions, to start the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Our backs are against the wall, and we have no choice but to push.”

At a time when our attention is misdirected by media concerned with tweets and emails, we are finding new ways to break through the distorted moral narrative in this country. We know that the issues of the day are bigger than the dichotomy of Republican versus Democrat, or conservative versus liberal. The moral and spiritual health of this nation depends on our capacity to see deeper and more expansively. We are not aligned with a political party or a single election. There are no

politicians who speak on our behalf. Rather, our task is to build the power necessary to hold our political system to genuine account.

Indeed, we are carrying out a phase of deep organizing and power building amongst the poor. We continue to engage in mass voter registration and voter mobilization, not as an end in itself, but to register people for a movement – a movement that votes, sings, educates and takes action together. We are mobilizing in our streets, communities, and at the sites of political and economic power. We continue to build a non-violent army of the poor that can do more than react, but can dictate the terms of this country's future. A new and unsettling force is awakening to revive the heart of democracy in America.

And now we are launching the Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody Has the Right to Live. This Budget flips the question of costs and raises the question of benefits of the Poor People's Campaign's Moral Agenda. What we learned in the *Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America* report, commissioned before we launched the Campaign, is that it is already costing society not to provide health care, to suppress voting rights, and to keep wages low. We know from the Flint water poisoning and the diseases brought about because of the lack of sanitation services in Lowndes County that whole generations of people are having their lives cut short, with youth and children denied living to their full potential because of gross and vast injustice. Research shows that every dollar cut from public education costs society many fold in police, mass incarceration, and social programs in the future. As economist Joseph Stiglitz has pointed out, there is a price to inequality: wealth and income inequality actually hinder the economy.

Therefore, this Budget looks at how much better we could be, as a nation, if we fixed inequality. It declares the moral thing to do is also the economically responsible thing to do. We MUST enact this Budget because we need to invest in the needs of society. We cannot afford NOT TO. We have been investing in killing people; we now must invest in life. We have been investing in systemic racism and voter suppression; we must now invest in expanding democracy. We have been investing in punishing the poor; we must now invest in the welfare of all. We have been investing in the wealthy and corporations; we must now invest in the people who have built up this country. In the words of Rev. Claudia de la Cruz from the Steering Committee of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, "the poor may not run this country, but we make this country run!"

The Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody Has the Right to Live proclaims abundance over scarcity, comfort to the weeping, release to those crippled by debt and poverty, and equal protection under the law for absolutely all. The world's sacred texts are clear on this. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Deuteronomy establishes that a nation that forgives debts, pays people a living wage, prohibits slavery, and organizes society around the needs of the poor will be a prosperous nation. It professes that to honor and love God, nations must love and welcome their immigrant neighbor.

We know that there will continue to be nay-sayers who will say: How will we pay for all of this? Our national debt stands at \$20 trillion and is growing. These people say that our nation is on a sure path to fiscal ruin and sooner or later we are going to have to deal with the consequences. We are burdening our children through our irresponsible spending and the only remedy is to curtail spending now.

But this critique does not have the last word. Instead what we have learned from our organizing, as well as from economists and policy-makers, is that it makes sense to invest in areas that make our country stronger: universal health care, infrastructure investment, and tuition-free higher education. In fact, strategically borrowing money to invest in our future is a safe and responsible choice; government borrowing can even make the economy stronger. Also, we want to remind the nation that we have paid for everything from the Bush tax cuts, to the forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the Trump tax cuts, with deficits. It is about time we put our spending to use — making life better, easing suffering, and investing in our future.

These nay-sayers will declare that the U.S. economy is doing fantastic. The first quarter of 2019 had the fastest annualized growth rate (3.2%) since 2015. The unemployment rate is down to 3.6%, the lowest in nearly 50 years. Average earnings are finally outpacing inflation, with the fastest increases happening at the bottom end of the wage scale. The stock market is hitting record highs. They question us saying, with all these positive signs, the poverty data you report are likely far outdated and you are overstating the need for the generous welfare and job creation programs you're calling for.

But we must respond with the fact that average hourly pay rose just 6 cents in April 2019 and 4 cents the month before that, after taking 400 years since 1519 to go from zero dollars to \$7.25 today. That is not prosperity! In fact, after wages have stagnated for so long, they will need to increase a lot more for working people to get their fair share of economic gains, and so they can meet their needs. At a rate of six cents per month, it would take more than 10 years for today's minimum wage of \$7.25 to reach \$15 per hour. Such small pay increases will not chip away at the country's \$1.6 trillion in student debt, and overall consumer debt of nearly \$4 trillion — a burden leading one in 15 borrowers to consider suicide. And we must not forget wages have also lagged far behind the increase in corporate profits.

We must also question who benefits from economic growth. The GDP may be increasing, but those gains are not making their way into the hands and pockets of the majority of people in the United States. We do not measure a society by the wealth huge corporations are able to store away to enrich and engorge themselves, but by the life and livelihood of the poorest residents. And with nearly half of the U.S. population experiencing poverty, the economy is not benefiting the people. But it could.

Our critics assert that raising taxes on corporations and the wealthy will be a drag on investment and job creation. They tell us keeping taxes low is the best way to keep our economy humming.

But we are called to respond to this critique. The Trump tax cuts have failed to create jobs in meaningful numbers. Instead, corporations have used most of their windfalls to enrich wealthy shareholders and CEOs, blowing a record-setting \$1 trillion in stock buybacks that inflate the value of their shares. And we want to remind people of history: in the 1950s and 1960s, corporations contributed as much as three times the share of federal revenues as they do today, with no job-killing effects.

The nay-sayers state that wealthy Americans and corporations should not be forced to give up their hard-earned money to taxation. They claim that when necessary, alleviating poverty is best done through private charity.

But we counter that there is no such thing as a self-made person. Every wealthy person benefited from a system of public investment, including infrastructure, educational systems, and the rule of law, without which their wealth would not be possible. Indeed, it is only fair that they contribute back to the system that made their wealth possible. And we question the effectiveness of charity to address significant social problems. While it is a good thing to be generous, in many cases charities actually inscribe the very inequalities they often seek to address. Furthermore, poverty and inequality are created by policy, and must be remedied by policy, not pity.

We also must point out that the legacy of ongoing racism, from slavery through Jim Crow, and to today's mass incarceration and public disinvestment means that people of color have never had access to the same opportunities as White people, and it is the responsibility of society to be equitable. Basic living standards like adequate housing, health care, education, safe drinking water, and access to work and fair wages are rights, not privileges. A moral society will guarantee these to ALL people.

And there are many nay-sayers who worry about us shifting funds from the military to social programs. They claim that a strong military keeps us safe in a dangerous world. They tell us that the threat of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, ISIS, and terrorism can only be defeated through maintaining the strongest military force the world has ever seen. That our military guarantees our freedom and fights for the freedom of peoples all over the world.

But we are compelled to reply that our forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have made the world more dangerous. Our military actions have led to the creation of new terrorist factions, built resentment and fear of the United States, and led to death and suffering for thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

Our spending on war and violence is arresting our ability to provide true security and well-being at home. Since 2001, we have spent \$4.9 trillion and counting<sup>11</sup> on war in the Middle East with nothing to show for it. That amount would be enough to provide comprehensive health insurance for every uninsured and underinsured American for more than 16 years.<sup>12</sup> Our current military spending of \$716 billion in 2019 is higher than at the peak of the Vietnam War, the Korean War, or the Reagan buildup of the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> Our foreign policy is the most militarized in the world. The United States has 90-95% of the world's foreign military bases; more than 40% of the world's nuclear weapons; and spends more on our military than the next seven countries combined. We could cut our military spending

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11 Counting only spending through FY2019, and excluding future costs for veterans' health and interest on the debt.

12 According to estimates by the University of Massachusetts PERI Institute for Medicare for All spending, insuring all uninsured and underinsured Americans would cost approximately \$300 billion per year, at current system costs (e.g. before any single payer cost efficiencies.) Pollin et al., "Economic Analysis of Medicare for All," 37. Insuring all uninsured and underinsured Americans would cost approximately \$300 billion per year, at current system costs (e.g. with no cost savings).

13 "A Budget for a Better America," Budget of the United States Government Fiscal Year 2020, March 11, 2019, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BUDGET-2020-BUD/pdf/BUDGET-2020-BUD.pdf>.

to \$400 billion or less per year, and still spend more than China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, combined.<sup>14</sup>

But the nay-sayers keep coming! They say: But the jobs – the military provides a proud career path for many Americans, and military contractors provide good jobs in communities across the country.

To this we must respond: for every job created by military investment, more jobs could be created by making that same investment in health care, infrastructure, clean energy, or education. Investment in wind energy could create 21% more jobs compared to military spending, and investment in elementary and secondary education could create 178% more jobs.

The Poor People's Moral Budget counters these and other narratives that the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival confronts. We challenge the idea that poverty is the fault of the poor, rather than structures in society that impoverish and oppress millions. We question the notion that poverty and prosperity are a zero-sum game: we do not need to steal from Peter to pay Paul, or raise taxes on the middle strata in order to pay for programs for the poor; and we disagree outright that there aren't enough resources to pay for what we need.

Because poverty is caused by structures and immoral policies, it will take moral policies and larger social transformation to lift the load of poverty. In this Budget, we show that if we raise taxes on those who can most afford to pay them, forgive debts of those who can least afford to pay them, and cut funds from the military, we can lift the whole society up, and create community security and community prosperity. This Budget shows that our demands are possible, and that if they are implemented, all of society will prosper. When you lift from the bottom, everyone rises.

We are presenting this Budget now, because we are witnessing a movement swearing that America will be being born anew in this moment, right in the midst of the deferred dreams and hopes of the poor. It has become clear that people are ready to come together and demand truth, love, and justice, and debunk the lies of scarcity and inevitable, unchangeable poverty.

In times such as these, we must confront "states' rights" arguments that have been used to justify slavery, welfare reform, and other draconian policies. We do not need to lower wages in one region to raise wages in another; we do not need to deny health care to people in one state in order to have welfare programs for people in another state. Extremist politicians do not need to stand in a ditch in order to keep their foot on people's neck, keeping themselves and everyone in their state down in order to declare some sort of superiority or supremacy.

This Budget is not an endorsement of any specific policy and it is not a policy prescription. It is, instead, an effort to offer a broader, bigger way to imagine society than our current public discourse and framing. The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival will continue to raise the issues, organize people, and build power in order to transform society and enact a moral agenda that

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<sup>14</sup> "Military Expenditure by Country," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), accessed May 22, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>. Military expenditures for China, Russia, and Iran: "World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 2018: Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance," United States Department of State, accessed May 23, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/world-military-expenditures-and-arms-transfers-2018/>. Military expenditures for North Korea in U.S. dollars from U.S. State Department for 2016.



puts people first and challenges the intersecting injustices of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative because the 140 million people living an American nightmare are not only the hope of the poor. The least of these, who are, in actuality, most of us, can lead the whole country out of this pain and suffering. The rejected are leading a moral and economic revival.

In the words of Langston Hughes, who wrote this back in 1935,

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again!

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# CONCLUSION



## CONCLUSION



**“The people who maintain this system want to blame this mess on us – like it’s our individual choices that got us into this. We have to correct that – We have to remind people that homelessness is not an individual moral failure, it is society’s collective moral failure...We are poor, but we aren’t stupid. We know that we aren’t the problem. We are the solution.”**

*Zalonda Woods, North Carolina*

For too long, we have turned to those with wealth and power to solve our most pressing social problems. We have been led to believe that those in positions of influence and authority will use the resources at hand in the best possible way for the betterment of our society. This orientation has justified tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations and work requirements for the poor; it has secured environmental shortcuts for industry and military expansion around the world; and it has yielded very little for the 140 million people in this country who are still poor and struggling to meet their needs.

As we have shown in this Budget, this is not because there is a lack of resources to address systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, and militarism. We are a wealthy country. We can provide robust voting rights, decent jobs, and secure incomes, housing, health care, education, peace, and a clean environment for everyone.

This Budget shows that if we prioritize the needs and demands of the poor, we will create more jobs, build up our infrastructure, and yield short- and long-term benefits that will grow our economy and protect our resources for future generations.

This is not an argument for charity or goodwill to the poor. It is, rather, a simple recognition that the poor are not only victims of injustice, but agents of profound social change. Rather than following the direction and leadership of the wealthy and powerful, it is time to follow the direction and leadership of the poor. Indeed, if we organize our resources around the needs of the 140 million, this Budget shows that we will strengthen our society as a whole.

This is why the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival continues to organize and build power among the poor today. It understands that those who have been cast out of the economy and who are living on the few remaining crumbs of its meager offerings are also articulating a way out of this wretched existence – not just for themselves, but for us all.

# Poor People's Campaign

A NATIONAL CALL for MORAL REVIVAL

