

***RFK in EKY***

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"As long as everyone is talking about what did or did not happen 35 years ago in Vietnam," writes Matt Miller, columnist and fellow at the [Center for American Progress](#), "they're not talking about the candidates' rival visions for the future, or domestic policy differences between the parties that are huge."

Of course, the Bush campaign's scurrilous lies about Kerry's record as a war hero must be challenged forcefully. But what ever happened to the important debate about the costs of war in Iraq--we've just passed the grim milestone of 1000 US deaths-- particularly at a time in which poverty is rapidly growing?

In February 1968, when poverty and another war weighed heavily on people's minds, Robert F. Kennedy, as chairman of the Senate subcommittee on employment, manpower and poverty, held two field hearings in Eastern Kentucky to explore the causes of Appalachian poverty and gauge the success of Lyndon Johnson's anti-poverty programs.

This week, John Malpede, a performance artist from Los Angeles, is staging *RFK in EKY*, a re-enactment of Kennedy's visit to Eastern Kentucky. "Reality has been accommodating to us," Malpede observed in a [recent interview](#) in the *New York Times*, where he discussed his hope that history could refocus our political debate on poverty and the costs of war at home.

Under President Bush, the rich have gotten richer, the middle-class has shrunk, and the ranks of the poor have expanded. In 2003, according to the Census Bureau's latest statistics, America's poverty rate jumped from 12.1 percent to 12.5 percent. Currently, some 36 million Americans live in poverty, while the country endures the worst child-poverty rate of any industrialized nation. Some 45 million Americans went without health insurance in 2003.

In sharp contrast, under the Bush Administration, to cite one figure, the top 50 outsourcing companies paid their CEOs, on average, \$10.4 million in 2003--a nearly 50 percent increase over a year earlier. The gap between the relative prospects of rich and poor in the age of Bush is driven home by *Executive Excess*, a new report released by the [Institute for Policy Studies](#) and [United for a Fair Economy](#), which documents that, "If the minimum wage had increased as quickly as CEO pay since 1990, it would today be \$15.76 per hour, rather than the current \$5.15 per hour." (Click [here](#) to view the report.)

[Remembering RFK's visit](#) to Kentucky is a useful way to reframe the 2004 political debate and articulate a vision of what is possible in this country. As Malpede says of his play: "The idea is to revisit a moment in history that was significant to the community and see how it resonates now."

Although the Right has worked assiduously to discredit the [War on Poverty](#), the effort was, in fact, successful. Between

1964 and 1973, the poverty rate declined from 19 percent to 11.1 percent due to programs such as Head Start, Medicare and food stamps. And we've made some strides since 1973. In an interview, Georgetown law professor and anti-poverty activist Peter Edelman pointed out that America has adopted the State Children's Health Insurance Program; expanded the Earned Income Tax Credit, increased the number of housing vouchers, created Pell Grants for higher education, and the living wage campaign is successful in over 100 cities and counties from coast to coast.

Under Bush however, "the labor market has failed," Edelman says. The jobs being created aren't good jobs, and we need to "keep chipping away" at poverty. "We're in a particularly bad period now" with Republicans controlling the entire federal government, but at the same time, Edelman believes "the moral support in the country for doing something about[poverty]" is substantial.

Edelman was an aide to Kennedy in 1968, and he has stayed true to Kennedy's fusion of pragmatism and idealism. Kennedy was moved in Appalachia by the unmet needs of the community's inadequate schools, its environmental degradation, and the working families he spoke to who had trouble feeding their children.

"Family after family still survives on beans and potatoes or rice, cornbread and fat back," Kennedy said during his visit. "In many of the counties of Eastern Kentucky, more than half of the adult men, sometimes over three quarters, have no work." Kennedy was not only bringing attention to poverty--but also to how people in Appalachia were cut out of access to education, and decent jobs, and lived without health care. While conditions in Appalachia have improved in recent decades, there are still "two Americas" in this country.

Edelman, who will be a participant in Malpede's *RFK in EKY*, says the play "reminds us, as Robert Kennedy was fond of saying, that one person can make a difference, and that people working together in larger numbers can make a huge difference. This is an especially crucial time to be communicating those kinds of reminders."

In 1997, former Senator Paul Wellstone re-traced RFK's steps in Appalachia and other poverty-stricken regions. Some journalists ridiculed his efforts. But Wellstone's crusading spirit underscores the kind of courage, focus and real compassion that defined Kennedy's commitment to calling attention to poverty in all its guises.

In the weeks ahead, it is likely that the vicious attacks against Kerry and the distorted views about another war held by men who have never accepted Former Defense Secretary's Robert McNamara's assertion that we were "terribly wrong" about Vietnam, will remain central to the political debate. But at a time of gutter-ball politics, we should refocus the debate on the real issues in 2004: waging war against poverty and finding a way out of the war in Iraq which is costing this country so much in lives and resources.