

The Boston Sunday Globe

Editorial

March 1, 1998

The Kerner report, 30 years later

By 1967 riots had ripped through American cities, turning the words Newark and Detroit into synonyms for uncontrollable Negro rage. But when President Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate, what he got back was a searing critique of white America.

On Feb. 29, 1968, the commission called the Kerner Commission after its head, Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois handed America an ugly portrait of itself. The commission's report declared that the ravaging plague in black ghettos was white racism.

"Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal," Righteously angry, the report listed 12 overall grievances divided into three levels of intensity. The three items of highest intensity were police practices, unemployment, and housing. But also included were disrespectful white attitudes, discriminatory justice, and an unresponsive government.

Marbled with sadness, the commission report concluded that it was largely telling America what it already knew. And wearily, such commission recommendations as ending de facto school segregation and increasing affordable housing still speak to festering national problems.

Thirty years later, fashionable arguments center on whether blacks are better or worse off and whether whites are less or more (covertly) racist. But a deeper surprise of looking into this old government mirror is seeing how ambitiously big the commission thought America's heart should be. The report called for the creation of 2 million jobs over three years. Welfare, it complained, saves money, not people. White society, it said, is deeply implicated in the problems of the ghetto.

Today the Kerner report is a heroic echo of a past in which yet another president compelled citizens to ask seriously what they could do for their country. Though the report shows up only fleetingly in history books, it is still a fresh call to measure the nation's worse problems and scrupulously judge the quality of America's response.

