

The Washington Post

King and Kerner: An Unfinished Agenda

By Edward W. Brooke
April 03, 2008



Kerner Commission chairman Otto Kerner, left, with New York Mayor and commission Vice Chair John Lindsay (Bob Daugherty – Associated Press)

America has had much to reflect upon during the approach of the interrelated 40th anniversaries of the final report of the Kerner Commission, the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and the round of riots that followed in Washington, Baltimore, Chicago and well over 100 other cities across the nation. We have heard Sen. Barack Obama's insightful speech on race and the reactions it provoked. Today, unfortunately, Dr. King's dream remains deferred.

Former senator Fred R. Harris and I are the two surviving members of President Lyndon Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the formal name of the commission chaired by then-Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner). Our commission concluded that black frustration grew out of underrepresentation in the political system, the police, the media and all other aspects of American life. We urged new investments in jobs, schools and housing. We declared that poverty, inequality and segregation in the racial ghetto had created a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. We avowed that white America had created and maintained the ghetto and that white society condoned it. These were strong words, but we believed that the truth needed telling.

I thought (and believe others did as well) that President Johnson would applaud our painstaking analysis and support our recommendations. But the president who had done so much for civil rights distanced himself from our findings. He did not invite us to the White House for the report's release, as was customary, nor did he embrace its recommendations.

In retrospect, I can see that our report was too strong for him to take. It suggested that all of his great achievements -- his civil rights legislation, his anti-poverty program, Head Start, housing legislation and all the rest of the Great Society -- had been only a beginning. We asked him, in an election year, to endorse the idea that white America bore much of the responsibility for black rioting and rebellion. However true that might have been, the message was politically too hot to handle.

Members of our commission could scarcely have envisioned the strides African Americans have made since the report's release or conceived of the growing numbers, progress and influence of Hispanic Americans.

With the ascendancy of an African American contender for the presidency, dispassionate observers might gasp at how far we have come in two generations. The achievements in business, entertainment, sports and politics that black and Hispanic Americans have made are notable, but not for their exception.

Yet, despite the visibility of accomplished African Americans and Hispanics and the progress in race relations that has been made in this country, for America's poor -- those who do not know what health care is because for them it doesn't exist, those for whom prison is a more likely prospect than college, those who have been abandoned to the worst of decaying, crime-ridden urban centers because of the flight of middle-class blacks, whites and Hispanics -- the future may be as bleak as it was for their counterparts in the 1960s.