

Introduction

(The following is an unedited transcript.)

Fred Harris: The hour having arrived at 8:30, by my clock, we'll begin to get underway. I'm Fred Harris, the chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. I want to welcome everyone here today.

Back in the summer of 1967, riots and terrible disorders broke out, exploded in most of the major cities of America. President Lyndon Johnson appointed a Citizen's Commission, The President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, also called the Kerner Commission to look into those riots and he gave us a charge. He appointed me as a member of it. Here's my picture over here, my bar mitzvah picture, actually. He gave us a charge of, composed of three questions. What happened, why did it happen, and what can be done to prevent it happening again and again?

We made our Report, the Kerner Commission did, in March 1968, with those words that became quite famous. America is moving toward two societies, one white, one black, separate and unequal. And we recommended, the Commission did, vigorous enforcement of what were then the new Civil Rights laws as well as greatly increased Federal social program efforts and most important of all, jobs.

The country, America, made progress for about a decade after the Kerner Commission report on virtually all aspects of race and poverty and then, particularly with the advent of the Reagan and Bush administrations, that progress stopped and we began to go backwards. We again began to make progress on race and poverty and the problems of the cities during the administration of Bill Clinton, but once again we've begun to regress with the advent of the administration and during the administration of President George W. Bush.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation is a private sector follow-on, the keeper of the flame for the report of the Kerner Commission and the report of the Milton S. Eisenhower Commission, which was appointed by President Johnson after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

Here today, the Eisenhower Foundation is beginning with this media forum on poverty, inequality and race, which is to be followed by commissioned studies and public hearings all around the country. An effort that will culminate in the, in an updated Kerner Report issued by the Eisenhower Foundation in March 2008, the anniversary of the original Kerner Commission report.

I want to express our appreciation to all participants, all the participants in this meeting today and particularly to the media representatives who are here for presentations and as panelists.

But before we go to our first panelist or panel, I want to introduce some people for brief remarks here at the head table. And first is Senior Professor of the National Labor College on the George Meany campus and the Vice-Chair of the Eisenhower Foundation, Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich.

Yvonne Scruggs-Leftwich: Thank you very much Mr. Chairman and my friend Senator Harris. This is a very important day today.

In many respects we seem to have come full circle from where we were before the deliberations of the Commission on Civil Disorders to where we are today. We acknowledged through the seminal work of the Commission, the significant role of the media in the presentation and the interpretation of the issue surrounding race and poverty. And today we want to examine the institutionalization of that role and look at ways in which -- as we say -- as we go forward.

We might be able to influence the focus and the direction of that very important role which the media plays and no one can tell us better than that, about that than members of the media and so, I too, thank you so much for joining us in this examination and this reflection and I look forward to participating today in that process.

Fred Harris: Thank you. I want to express the thanks of the Eisenhower Foundation for all those who participated in planning and putting together this excellent media forum and especially the person I introduce next, the Director of Communications of the Eisenhower Foundation, Leila McDowell.

Leila McDowell: Thank you, Chairman. Thank you very much, Chairman and I think if President Harris had won the presidency back in 1976, this conversation probably wouldn't be so needed, but unfortunately that didn't happen, so we are here today and we just want to thank everyone for being here.

The discourse in the media has such a direct impact on the policy discourse and unfortunately we've seen the policy deliberations around race, poverty, and inequality slip off the table of the national conversation and we don't see it addressed either in our electoral campaigns, we don't see it addressed in Congress with any real priority.

So, hopefully this new report by the Kerner Commission, these discussions today by such incredibly distinguished members of the media can begin to have an impact on the narrative that is being spun around race, poverty, and inequality and bring the Nation's attention once again to what continues to be an unequal society, divided, black, white, Hispanic, poor and rich and so we want to begin to address some of the inequality that we see that truly undermines the greatness of this Nation. So, thank you all very much being here.

Fred Harris: And now the person is a member of the staff of the Milton S. Eisenhower Commission and is a highly capable President and CEO of the Eisenhower Foundation, Dr. Alan Curtis.

Alan Curtis: Thank you Senator Harris, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, everyone.

Fifty years ago when Britain invaded the Suez Canal Zone, the Guardian Newspaper was extremely critical right off the bat. The Guardian stood its ground, despite great pressure, by the government of Sir Anthony Eden. Today many feel that leading American media should have been equally critical from the beginning of the American invasion of Iraq. Today, many also believe that leading American media have declined in their reporting of poverty, on race, and on inequality.

For example, just a couple weeks ago the Wall Street Journal hit what may have been a new, in a lead article in the Journal, which called education a feel-good solution for the problem of inequality in America.

By contrast, the CBS Sunday Morning Stories by the late Charles Kuralt, were shining examples of quality media. As Fred said, the Eisenhower Foundation is the private sector continuation of the Kerner Riot Commission of 1968 and we want to frame today's forum by showing you how Charles Kuralt and Terry Smith covered the Eisenhower Foundation's 25th Anniversary update of the Kerner Commission's final report. This story aired in 1993.

(Video segment played.)

Alan Curtis: Well, I'm using my middle name Alan now, but I don't think much else has changed since that 25-year update in 1993.

Today poverty, inequality, racial segregation, and crime are all increasing. In early 2008, the Eisenhower Foundation, will issue a 40-year update of the Kerner Commission, as Fred has told you. We hope that the presidential candidates then, this will be in the spring in the middle of primary season, will debate our recommendations. The update will be based on a series of hearings and forums in the United States and abroad beginning with this day's very important focus on the media.

We are asking each of our panelists throughout the day to answer two basic questions. One, why as we believe has the quality and frequency of good media coverage on poverty, inequality, and race and solutions to these American dilemmas declined since the 1960's? And two, what can be done to reverse this decline?

There are many presenters at this forum so we ask each panelist to speak for only about 10 minutes at the beginning, but then we'll have plenty of time for interaction among them and we think that will create sparks and interest and a lot of great new ideas. For each panel we will hold discussion and questions until all speakers have presented. We ask the panelists to press the red microphone button before they speak or we won't be able to record this.

Finally, let me thank Susan Campbell for her excellent work in organizing this forum and Owen Perry and Brenda Dowton for their fine assistance. Fred?