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Escape for the cities

Break old political chains

THE ILLS facing America's inner cities have an intricate history of racial discrimination and social imbalance. Remediating them therefore requires long-term vision and leadership.

So concludes the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation after closely examining the federal aid that actually made it to postriot South Central Los Angeles. Washington was prodigal in good intentions, the foundation says, but lacking in political will and foresight to apply durable solutions.

Twenty-five years ago the country suffered the worst riots in its history when racial disorders in Newark and Detroit spread to other communities. The Kerner Commission, investigating those events, concluded that their root was that our nation was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal." That conclusion, the foundation's report says, is even more relevant today.

The destitution of inner cities lingers on, the report suggests, largely because government typically reacts to crises instead of preventing them. That's what happened in South Central LA. While national attention remained focused on violence there, the White House and Congress hastily approved a short-term, \$1.8 billion aid package. But once national interest shifted, they failed to agree on a more ambitious program. Giving priority to their constituents' particular interests, some congressmen snarled the aid package with tax hikes that collided with President Bush's "no new taxes" pledge. The plan died in a presidential veto the day after the election.

The report offers some commonsense solutions to inner city problems. Thus it recommends reorganizing ineffective programs such as the federal anti-drug campaign. Currently, 70 percent of its \$12 billion budget goes to interdiction, while only 30 percent goes to prevention and treatment. How about changing priorities? The foundation further recommends strengthening successful job-training and placement, welfare, and health care programs.

The report's overall lesson couldn't be more evident: Seek inner city solutions based on existing needs, not fleeting political demands after a crisis. More important, don't let workable solutions remain hostage to Washington's gridlock.