

## **Deep Resolve Needed to Bridge the Race Abyss**

At a recent reception in his honor, Harvard law professor Christopher Edley spoke about his new book, *Not All Black and White: Affirmative Action and American Values*, and about his role as senior adviser for President Clinton's race initiative overshadowed lately by the Monica Lewinsky sideshow.

It was Edley who came up with the conciliatory phrase "Mend it. Don't end it" to define Clinton's stance on affirmative action. Speaking last week at Philadelphia's Downtown Club, Edley conceded the National Conversation on Race is unlikely to produce agreement on explosive issues like affirmative action.

Designing a good policy is not enough without political and moral consensus, Edley explained. We have to care about each other more and deeply, but we don't because color gets in the way, he said. The national conversation about race is not about closing the chat gap or singing Kumbayah; it's about finding shared values that transcend color and class, as a predicate for action.

The race initiative is likely to fail, Edley said, because working across deeply held racial perceptions and experiences is very hard work harder than rocket science and we don't know how to do it. Neither does President Clinton, although he at least has the courage to try.

If we are to cross the bridge to the new millennium free of the 20th-century dilemma of race, Edley said, we must lead ourselves, and find ways to build bridges across our differences.

Proof of the rough road ahead is in a new report compiled by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. *The Millennium Breach: Richer, Poorer and Racially Apart* is an update of the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the Kerner Report published in 1968.

It was the Kerner Commission, charged with determining why American cities had erupted in violence in the late 60s and what could be done about it, that concluded:

*Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal.*

For a brief time in the 70s, after the Kerner findings were announced and before the Reagan-Bush era began, civil-rights laws helped expand the African-American middle class.

African-Americans and other minorities were admitted to elite colleges and universities for the first time in significant numbers. Middle-class black families were able to move from ghettos, leaving the poor behind, concentrated and isolated in crumbling neighborhoods where jobs with good pay were disappearing.

In the 80s and 90s, poor blacks poor people generally experienced a steady economic decline, as positive economic trends reversed themselves:

The rich did get richer. Between 1977 and 1988, incomes for the wealthiest 1 percent increased by 120 percent, while income for the poorest fifth decreased 10 percent. With the poor and working classes losing ground, the middle class stayed about the same, meaning that, compared to the rich, it too lost ground. Today, the top 1 percent of Americans has more wealth than the bottom 90 percent.

During the 80s, child poverty increased more than 20 percent affecting minorities disproportionately. The U.S. poverty rate for children is four times the Western European average.

American neighborhoods are resegregating. In poor urban public schools, two-thirds of children fail to score at the basic level on national tests.

America's housing policy for the poor and minorities has become prison-building. In the 80s and early 90s, the number of prison cells tripled at the same time housing appropriations for the poor were cut by more than 80 percent. Now only one in four eligible families can get housing.

States spend more on prisons than on higher education. A decade ago, the opposite was true. Those new prisons are disproportionately filled by minorities. In part because of sentencing disparities between crack and powdered cocaine. The current rate of incarceration of African-American men is four times higher than the rate of incarceration of black men in South Africa before the end of apartheid.

If you can get past that depressing litany, you come to the positive side of the Eisenhower Foundation's report a straightforward analysis of what works, specifically what we can do to complete the unfinished business of the Kerner report. Through its affiliate, the Corporation for What Works,

the Eisenhower Foundation has carefully analyzed the needs of the urban poor and identified specific initiatives and models that really do work, with an eye to having ready answers for naysayers who use the refrain, Nothing works, as an excuse to do nothing.

The foundation's 10-point investment and opportunity policy is based on what works in education, employment, economic development, race and criminal justice. It includes familiar priorities, such as full funding for Head Start. Studies show every \$1 spent on preschool yields \$4.75 in benefits later, yet Head Start is funded for only about one third of eligible children.

Another proposal would create a Corporation for Youth Investment, to replicate successful after-school programs and guidance programs for teens, and revising the war on drugs to put more emphasis on treatment.

Another point calls for replacing the Job Training Partnership Act with a new model that puts thorough training ahead of work preparing workers for good jobs with a future, rather than dead-end employment.

The 10th point calls for recognition that only the federal government has the resources to replicate what works on a scale equal to the dimensions of the problem.

The foundation argues that the \$56 billion annual price tag on its what works list could be paid easily if \$100 billion given to corporations in subsidies and tax breaks each year corporate welfare were cut in half.

The blueprint for action is clear, but making such a radical change in national priorities requires a tremendous surge of concerted political will.

And before that can happen, Chris Edley emphasized at the Downtown Club, we'll have to learn to care about each other more and deeply than we ever have before.

*Linda Wright Moore is a member of the Daily News editorial board.*