

Millennium report shows it's time to close black-white economic gap

By Charlie James

Thirty years ago, the Kerner Commission warned us that we were developing two nations, one white and one black. A recently released report called the "*Millennium Breach*" now reports that everything predicted by the Kerner Commission has essentially come true.

They say that the economic and racial divide in America not only has materialized, it's also getting wider. That may just surprise many of the people who talk about killing affirmative action because they are in favor of a colorblind society. Maybe they are just blind to what is really happening in America.

"People need to become aware that things are getting worse," said the Millennium Report co-author, Fred Harris, a former senator from Oklahoma and a member of the Kerner Commission. "They need to see their own self-interest in this - that it doesn't make sense to have these underutilized regions in the country and these underutilized people whose lives are being wasted."

The report concludes that the average person wants to do more for the inner-city communities but simply doesn't know what to do or how to go about it. You guessed it; I have a few suggestions.

The Seattle/Tacoma region is one of the unique areas of the country. We have a combined African American population that's larger than places such as Shreveport, La., and Macon, Ga. More than 100,000 African Americans are in the greater Seattle area alone, and yet we still don't have the kind of inner-city ghettos that you see in those older communities.

What we have is one of the best-educated and wealthiest communities, per capita, in the nation. What we also have are some of the wealthiest young entrepreneurs ever assembled in one city.

I believe that Bill Gates, Paul Allen and others will also prove to be some of the leading philanthropists in the history of the United States before all is said and done.

This mix of people and wealth offers all of us a unique opportunity if we are bold enough to grab it. The major reason I was so adamant about getting the new stadium financed was because it provided an opportunity for inner-city youth to be trained and employed. Turner Construction is proving to be one of the most farsighted builders in the history of America. This company has understood the need to involve everyone, and even though its process of inclusion is still be worked out, the intent is clear.

It would be nice if some of the big contractors would stop playing the same old games and realize that it's not in the best interest of anyone to make it difficult for minority contractors to survive - but old habits seem difficult to break.

Paul Allen has empowered Turner Construction to go beyond the ordinary or what is legal, and we all will benefit because of it. But Allen and Gates could do much more. Matter of fact, they could completely change race relations in America, because they are fortunate to have the money in a city where the right kind of African American community resides.

The Seattle/Tacoma region has taken the lead in developing programs for inner-city business. The Black Dollar Days Task Force is one of the leaders in the nation and is based in Seattle. There are several other groups and individuals who really understand this process, such as Jim Thomas and Community Capital and Tom Woods.

Gates and Allen have done a marvelous job of building wings at Stanford and putting money back into Lakeside School, building museums and stadiums. But a \$50 million investment in creating a model inner-city community in Seattle/Tacoma would do far more for America.

It normally takes two to three generations for a group to build the infrastructure it needs. Racism in America has completely stunted the normal developmental process in most inner-city communities. Something extraordinary must now happen to change that. We simply cannot wait for this process to happen normally. It's time to jump-start it somewhere.

I have traveled all over America trying to find that ideal African American community that has all the necessary components for success.

If I would have discovered that 80 percent of the African American communities were shaky but 20 percent were not, that would have told me that most of the problems were internal. But when you cannot find one inner-city community that has the necessary business, social and political infrastructure necessary for success, you know the problem is deeper than ineffective organizing.

We can create the model here and began a healthy national dialogue about how to turn around inner-city communities.

Being the wealthiest man in the world, or one of the 10 wealthiest, means a lot more if that wealth can make a major difference in the lives of average people. If we find a way of turning around the inner cities, we will have found the key to making all our cities productive: Crime would go down; the cost of police and prisons would decline; and, as a result, there would be more money to do the things we need to do.

It's time to reverse this crazy slide into mediocrity that accelerated with Ronald Reagan Republicans declaring that ketchup was a vegetable. Kids in inner-city schools are so unprepared for the real world that it brings down the educational quality of the entire nation. When parents are unproductive, when poverty is the norm and when gangs and drugs represent most of their economy, the result is underutilized communities and underutilized people.

It's time for some bold strokes from people who have the foresight and the wealth to make it happen. The "*Millennium Breach*" report gives us another look at America and where it's headed. We are fortunate to have the tools to reverse this trend right here in Seattle. The issue is whether the people with the money have the will. From those whom providence has blessed with so much, far more is expected.

We have the skills in the African American community of Seattle/Tacoma to make it work. Now we need a real partnership with those on the other side of Lake Washington.

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