

Gregory Stanford: Thank you, Senator. The Kerner Commission Report marked a turning point for the nation's news media. Pre-Kerner, newsrooms were all-white or almost all-white. And the widespread assumption was that that was natural order of things. Post-Kerner, many editors knew better and vowed to integrate their staffs.

I was an intern on the sports desk of The Milwaukee Journal in the summer of 1967. The civil disturbance in Milwaukee that summer was among the disorders that prompted President Lyndon Johnson to convene the Commission. The media section of the Kerner Report jibes with my own mission as a journalist. The Report ripped the news media for rarely looking at the black community and then with white men's eyes. My mission has been to supply another set of eyes.

I saw my mission as dovetailing with journalism's purpose, which is to report accurately on significant goings-on. Adding different perspectives enhances the understanding of what's happening, thus the accuracy of the reporting. The news media pleaded guilty to the Kerner Commission indictment. The rioting itself had hammered home the point. It caught the media flat-footed. White newsrooms had been unaware of the depths of the rage that seethed in the black community. Some papers even lacked black reporters to dispatch to the action.

There has been progress. Newsrooms feature many more eyes of color than they used to. Most big newsrooms have beyond tokenism. Brought in primarily as metro and sports reporters, African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, and American Indians have spread throughout the newsroom. They cover city hall, write about fashions, report on business, pen columns, edit stories. They have also spread upward, as editors making decisions about what to cover and where to place stories, as members of editorial boards, helping to decide the paper's official stance on issues of the day.

Non-whites made up four percent of the newsroom work force on newspapers in 1978, when the American Society of Newspaper Editors first kept track. Now they make up 14 percent. But, of course, progress has been too slow. Newsrooms are far more racially diverse than they once were, but they are far less racially diverse than the nation, where 34 percent of the population is non-white.

And the ASNE noted that the nation's mainstream newspapers missed all five benchmarks that organization set for diversity for this year. For instance, the benchmark for the share of non-whites working in the newsroom was 19 percent, compared to the actual 14 percent. And the goal for non-white supervisors was 16 percent, the actual number was 11 percent.

A racially diverse staff is not just an end in itself, it's also a means to coverage that better reflects the racially diverse world, at least in theory. My experience is that the theory holds up. When they Milwaukee Journal, for instance, got an African-American fashion editor, the paper started including African-Americans among it's models. And the presence of Hispanic editorial page editor has made the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel editorial page more attune to and more knowledgeable about immigration issues.

The passion for reporting on race and poverty has waned. Why? The reasons are complex. But, basically we are in a war and the other side is winning. That side's narrative has become the dominant narrative -- namely non-whites and poor people are not worthy

of attention. They have nobody but themselves to blame for their plight. The other side has spun that narrative in books, in research papers, on radio talk shows. And a journalism vice the Kerner Commission complained about -- uncritical reporting -- has helped that outlook hold sway. The contentious issue of affirmative action illustrates the point.

Viewed by itself, affirmative action makes no sense whatsoever. It's preferential treatment for non-whites and no race should get special privileges. But that corrective policy does make sense against a backdrop in which preferential treatment for whites is routine. The news media typically ignores that backdrop altogether, or half-explains it.

A close friend of mine, an older gentleman who happens to be African-American, is a wizard with his hands. In the Army he got some training in electrical work. After his discharge he wanted to become an electrician. But when he went to apply to the union that controlled entry into the trade, he was told that it didn't accept Negroes.

Instead, he raised a family on a factory job. He eventually did well thanks to his and his wife's pluck and wits, but he could have done better without as much struggle were he allowed to have become an electrician. He cites that rejection as justification for affirmative action that might benefit his children and grandchildren who would have gotten off to a financially better start in life if racism had not quashed his dreams.

Indeed, reporters sometimes site past bias as a reason for affirmative action. But, the advantages whites now enjoy as a result of such bias is only half the story. The other half, which often goes unnoted, is that the biases aren't just in the past. They continue to this day as a mountain of evidence suggests. For instance, on the job front, white high school dropouts are still more likely to land a job than black high school grads. Research shows if your name on the resume sounds black, you're less likely to be asked to come in for an interview than if your name sounds white when the resumes are otherwise the same.

You want to move? White skin reduces your chances of being told that the apartment you are interested in is no longer available.

You use drugs. White skin vastly reduces your chances of landing in prison.

Need a loan? Again, white skin gives you an edge. You are likelier to get a loan with more favorable terms than African-Americans with equal income and credit worthiness.

The list of advantages white skin bestows goes on and on. Yet that backdrop is often missing from news coverage of the affirmative action debate.

That backdrop raises these questions. Why is preferential treatment for whites okay, but preferential treatment for non-whites is not okay? Should the preferential treatment whites routinely enjoy have some kind of counterforce, benefiting people of color for the sake of racial justice or should American society be slanted in favor of whites for ever and ever?

The news media unfortunately does not raise these questions. It should. The affirmative action struggle is part of the war to which I referred. The other side has made opposition to that corrective policy a litmus test for a court appointment. A fact that has

gotten scant exploration in the news media. Hence as I speak, the Supreme Court seems closer to smashing what's left of affirmative action.

What must be done? A few suggestions:

First, end the white-out of black mainstreams thinking on public-affairs TV shows. Black conservatives get the play. The whites who run these shows seem to prefer John McWhorter, a critic of black culture, over say, Cornel West, today's W.E.B. DuBois. Now, I have nothing against McWhorter or his ideological compatriots, in fact I think they make valuable contributions to a debate black people ought to be having. But I just don't understand why African-American authors and leaders who resonate with most black people don't get invites to mainstream shows.

Two, integrate the Sunday morning and other TV talk shows with journalists of color. Newspaper columnists of color are an excellent pool to draw from.

Three, explore preferential treatment for whites, and not superficially. Amass the studies, dig, ask tough questions, don't just leave the issue to he-said-this- but-he countered-that reporting.

Four, help fortify the black press which is now, with some notable exceptions, just a shadow of its former self. A strong black press could help set the national agenda. I think we just had an example of that.

Five, be aware of the campaign to belittle the cause of people of color and of poor people and don't just accept uncritically that campaign's pronouncements, even when couched in studies.

Six, redouble efforts to have American newsrooms look more like America.
Thank you.