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Nation's strides toward equality have been great, but far more is needed on the economic front

By Dwight Lewis

It was 30 years ago today March 1, 1968 that this nation was said to be moving toward two increasingly separate Americas:

- A white society principally located in suburbs, in smaller central cities, and in the peripheral parts of large central cities.
- A Negro society largely concentrated within large central cities.

Within two decades, this division could be so deep that it would be almost impossible to unite the two societies. That was the view from the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, better known as the Kerner Commission.

That panel was appointed July 28, 1967 by President Lyndon B. Johnson following racial disorders in some 100 American cities including Newark, Detroit, Cincinnati, Houston, Phoenix, Cleveland, New Haven, Atlanta and even Nashville.

The disorder brought shock, fear, bewilderment to the nation.

"What happened?" Johnson asked. "Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?"

The Kerner Commission took Johnson's directive, then traveled the country seeking answers.

"This deepening racial division is not inevitable," Kerner Commission members reported. "The movement apart can be reversed. Choice is still possible. ...

"To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.

"The alternative is not blind repression or capitulation to lawlessness. It is the realization of common opportunities for all within a single society."

That was 30 years ago. Where is the nation now?

Raise that question to 50 different people today, and you'll get 50 different answers.

"I think we're doing good," Dr. Sherman Webster, a retired sociology professor at Tennessee State University, told me. "You can see it. Just look at the economy, for blacks and whites. You've got more jobs than people to fill them."

But what about the poor people who are still among us?

"A lot of them just haven't taken advantage of the opportunities that are out there," said Webster, who interviewed witnesses in several different cities for the Kerner Commission's report.

When you look at certain statistics, it's hard to disagree with Webster:

- In 1980, 8% of black adults (25 years old and over) had at least a bachelor's degree. By 1994, this proportion had increased to 13%. The corresponding figures for whites were 18% and 23%.
- The black-to-white fertility gap is closing for unmarried teens. In 1970, the fertility rate for unmarried teens was 10 times higher for blacks than whites (78 vs. 8); by 1990 it was just 4 times higher (81 compared with 20).

That's progress, but when you look at other statistics, you see the nation still has a long way to go.

Newsweek reports that:

- The unemployment rate for young men in inner cities is over 30%; the national rate is under 5%.
- The U.S. income gap has widened to the point that the top 1% of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 90%. The poor are disproportionately African-American and Hispanic.
- One in three young black men is in prison, on probation or on parole.
- States now spend more per year on prisons than on higher education. Ten years ago, the spending priorities were reversed.

Just yesterday, a study reported that this nation is still into two societies: "one black, one white separate and unequal."

"While leaders and pundits talk of full employment, inner city unemployment is at crisis levels," said the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. "The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and minorities are suffering disproportionately."

Like I said earlier, ask 50 different people their assessment, and you'll get 50 different answers.

Now, at a time of economic growth and prosperity, there is no excuse for the fact that nearly a third of inner city men are out of work. And why is it in this land of opportunity that the greatest wealth is clutched in the hands of a mere 1% of Americans?

Address these economic problems, and maybe we will see a change in the prison figures.

The first thing it takes is the will to make things right.

As the Kerner Commission Report says: "The most important step toward domestic peace is an act of will; this country can do for its people what it chooses to do."

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