## Kerner Prophecy on Race Relations Came True, Report Says

Despite Progress, Foundation Finds Separate and Unequal Societies More Deeply Rooted

By Michael A. Fletcher

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-- Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation Report

Thirty years after a presidential commission declared, our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal, that dire warning has become reality, according to a report to be released today.

The Kerner Commission s prophecy has come to pass, states the report from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a group founded to continue the work of the commission, which was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to probe the causes of rioting in urban American in the 1960s.

The new report notes that substantial racial progress has occurred in the three decades since the Kerner Commission released its groundbreaking report. The black middle class has grown to unprecedented levels, black business has expanded and the number of black elected officials continues to increase. But even with those gains, inequalities with troubling racial dimensions are becoming more deeply routed in American society, the report concludes.

The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer and minorities are suffering disproportionately, said the report, co-written by Eisenhower Foundation Lynn A. Curtis and former Oklahoma senator Fred R. Harris (D). The report lists an array of racial and economic statistics to back its bleak conclusions. While the American economy booms, most adults in many inner cities do not work in a typical week. The top 1 percent of Americans have more wealth than the bottom 90 percent, the report says,

placing the United States first in the world among industrialized nations when it comes to wealth inequality.

In addition, 40 percent of minority children attend urban schools, where more than half of the students are poor and fail to reach even basic achievement levels. With 1.5 million prisoners, the United States incarcerates more people than any nation in the world, and one in three young African American men are in prison, on parole or probation.

The private market has failed the inner city. The prison system is a symbol of discrimination. A class and racial breach is widening again as we begin the new millennium, the report said.

The report s conclusions parallel those of two other reports issued by the Eisenhower Foundation that update the Kerner Commission s work. It calls for the expansion of initiatives it says have the proven ability to close the nation s economic and racial gaps, including Head Start, well-structured after-school programs, targeted job training and community-sensitive police strategies.

The main phrase that we use is replication [of programs] on a scale that is equal to the scale of the problem, Curtis said in an interview. There is a lot of stuff that works. All we have to do is fully fund it. It is not like there is a lot of magic involved in this.

Critics, however, called the report pessimistic and dismissed its central findings as out-of-sync with the nation s increasingly complex social and racial realities.

At the core of the Kerner report is this notion that blacks are trapped in the inner city and poverty and whites are in the suburbs. But here, there is no mention of the fact that you have had a massive movement of blacks from inner cities to suburbs since 1968, said Stephen Thernstrom, a Harvard University professor who is co-au thor of America in Black and White, which charts the nation s racial progress over the past half century.

If you look at social contact, it has increased markedly. Interracial dating is up. Interracial marriage, the same, Thernstrom continued. Whatever the fault lines are in our society, the idea that it is the old-fashioned black and white seems to me fairly simplistic.

Jim Sleeper, whose book Liberal Racism argues that many advocates overstate the continued significance of race, called the report s findings self-serving. While acknowledging that wide economics gaps continue to exist in society, he said, the reasons have less and less to do with race.

Race and poverty are intertwined, and each makes the other worse, he said, pointing out that poverty levels have worsened in the past 30 years and that the nation s poor are disproportionately black and Hispanic. You can t argue with the facts.

Harris credited affirmative action, civil rights laws and anti-poverty programs with fueling the expansion of the black middle class and professional ranks in the three decades since the original Kerner report was written. But the progress we ve made on race and poverty really stopped toward the end of the 1970s, he said. Then, we began in many ways to go backward.