

DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE
ROCHESTER, NY
TUESDAY
MAR 3, 1998

Editorials

A Nation Divided

Much work remains in America's ongoing struggle against poverty and racism

Thirty years after a high-level commission warned of separate and unequal societies in America -- one black, one white -- a new report confirms the future is now. Dire predictions by the Kerner Commission of a deeply divided America along racial and economic lines have come to pass.

Nonsense? After all, there are signs everywhere of economic, social and political advancements by African-Americans. Some of the nation's wealthiest and most influential citizens are African-Americans: people like Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan and Vernon Jordan.

Or look at what's happened over the past three decades in Mississippi, once a bastion of racial hate and segregation. It has more black-elected officials than any other state. That's indisputable progress.

Nonetheless, it would be foolish to dismiss the findings in a new study by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, released last week in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the Kerner Commission report. The new study found, as the Kerner Commission predicted after race riots across the nation, widespread evidence of deepening poverty and wider racial polarization -- particularly in the nation's poor urban areas.

Rather than debating the extent of these problems as intellectuals and social scientists are doing in recently published works, the nation must finally commit to doing better. And as the Eisenhower Foundation report notes, given the prosperity the country is experiencing, there is no better time than now to do so.

True, money is never a cure-all. But it's been well documented that investing tax dollars in education programs like Head Start as well as in quality day care and after-school programs can be powerful weapons against crime, poverty and discrimination.

President Clinton seems to understand the urgent need for America to come to grips with its racial and class struggle. In a refreshing departure from presidents of the recent past, who've talked out of both sides of their mouths on racial matters, Clinton has been clear and consistent. His often pooh-poohed President's Advisory Board on Race is finally beginning to exercise clout. On recommendation of the panel, Clinton last month sent a budget to Congress that seeks an \$86 million or 16 percent increase in funding for agencies like the Equal Opportunity Commission. More policy changes like this one are imperative.

It was Martin Luther King Jr., who once said: "The great majority of Americans are still uneasy with injustice but unwillingly yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it." Isn't it time that he be proved wrong?