



Are we in a burning house?

By Bankole Thompson
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A look at the fulfillment of Dr King's prophesy



King



Kerner

This week at Wayne State University, an important national hearing will be held, with the objective of dissecting four decades of the debilitating effects of race and poverty in America's inner cities. It will take place Saturday, Nov. 17, 10 a.m., at the university's Law School Auditorium.

Organized by the Kerner Commission, named after its late chairman, Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, the commission set up in 1968 by then-President Lyndon Johnson, one year after the 1967 social justice explosion in Detroit, will hear from Detroiters and those concerned about the current state of the nation.

There are two Americas, was the conclusion of the report which unapologetically listed racism and economic inequality as hindrances to urban progress.

Johnson had expected the Kerner Commission Report to say otherwise and termed the riots to be the work of subversive or outside forces. Instead the damning Kerner report became America's foremost comprehensive document looking at racial issues.

Not surprising that Johnson found it difficult to accept the findings of this commission given that it came during the height of Jim Crow.

America's premier peace officer, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described the commission's blistering report as "a physician's warning of approaching death."

Revered entertainer and political activist Harry Belafonte recalls the last days of King and always tells audiences around the country about the slain civil rights analogy of the burning house.

"He was in my home and we are discussing strategy for our continuing struggle. We noticed he seemed distracted and troubled," Belafonte recalled.

According to Belafonte, King told him and others in the room, "I'm beset with a grave question, the question is what do I do with the sense that we're integrating into a burning house? I think we're just going to become firemen."

Since his last words on Earth, the struggle for racial and economic justice has been endangered by the undeniable reality that not many firemen have been available since.

So as the discussion kicks off at Wayne on Saturday, it should hinge on what needs to be done to save the many millions of Americans caught in the burning house.

When we have 40 million Americans without health insurance, that's a tragedy and certainly we need firemen to aid and deliver us from this quagmire.

When poverty rocks the richest nation in the world and the issue becomes a non-issue among the top candidates seeking the presidency, with the notable exception Sen. John Edwards, I'm left dumbfounded.

When racism is very much alive and affirmative action is eliminated in Michigan under the false assertion that it gives minorities special privileges instead of it being seen as a panacea to a sordid historical past, I'm stupefied.

When insurance redlining is legitimized and allowed to go on unabated without any sense of looking at its consequences and impact on urban dwellers who pay the highest premiums, and no one seems to care, I'm astonished.

When home foreclosures have become the 2007 nightmare for our elderly, shattering the

notion of the American dream of homeownership, I'm enraged.

When public education is underfunded and the cheerleaders of No-Child Left Behind are dancing in the corridors of an unsubstantial ideology of compassionate conservatism, I'm grieved.

When the liberals take the minority vote for granted, basically masking their conceit that they have a ballot monopoly on a diverse cultural landscape, I'm disappointed.

When these very liberals reneged on the November 2006 congressional election mandate given to them by voters outraged about the war in Iraq, I'm left wondering is there any common sense in the house that is common among the people?

Detroit is a microcosm of the burning house King referred to.

I urge the Kerner Commission to listen to the people.

A day before her husband's funeral, civil rights matriarch Coretta Scott King delivered a powerful speech to thousands of sanitation workers in Memphis.

"We are concerned about not only the Negro poor but the poor all over the America and all over the world. Every man deserves a right to a job and an income so that he can pursue liberty, life and happiness," King said.

"Locked in the Poorhouse" is the book on race and poverty edited by Sen. Fred Harris, one of two surviving members of the Kerner Commission, and Lynn A. Curtis, president of the M.S. Eisenhower Foundation, trustee of the commission.

Bankole Thompson's latest book, "A Matter of Black Transformation," examines Blacks and globalization and is required reading at Wayne State University. Reach him at bthompson@michronicle.com.