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Still the chasm: Racial gap remains unbridged

By Gregory Stanford

To narrow the nation's worsening racial divide, says a new report, a broad-based alliance must form across the chasm.

Well, this remedy has just one hitch. To date, a formidable obstacle has doomed such alliances. The obstacles? The racial divide.

So the report takes us anew to what you might call the conundrum that lies at the heart of race relations in America.

How do you unite to erase the color line when the color line prevents such unity? The riddle has stumped the nation since its birth, so the nation remains stuck in color.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation issued the new report as a 30-year follow-up to the Kerner Commission Report, which, in its most familiar line, had warned: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal."

Alas, as the Eisenhower report observes, the Kerner Commission was prophetic. That grim future has largely come to pass.

The 1968 document noted: "Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghettos a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans."

The twin evils of segregation and poverty rage even more intensely in the nation's inner cities today, the Eisenhower report points out.

The document notes that tackling racial inequality languishes at the bottom of the nation's to do list, if there.

To move the item near the top, the foundation urges the formation of a new broad-based political alliance, bringing together the working class, the middle class and the poor from both sides of the color line.

It notes that, over the last 15 years, the rich have gained economically at the expense of blue-collar workers and the poor, who have lost ground, and of middle-income people, who have been running in place.

These losers in the division of America's economic spoils can rally around a demand for "a full-employment policy that eliminates the economic marginality of the poor and at the same time reduces the anxiety of the working and middle classes," the report says. It adds:

"None of these groups needs to gain at the expense of the others."

How true. Trouble is, time and again in American history, racial feelings - mainly, whites' dislike of blacks - have blocked the unity over economic issues.

Sure, for a brief while the Populists brought blacks and whites together in the South - an exception that proved the rule. The fear that blacks would gain political power drove many whites from the movement, which eventually turned on blacks.

This racial disunity meant that Populism was not the political force it could have been. As a result, whites lost big-time. For instance, they didn't get their 40 hour work week, a Populist cause, as early as they might have, had the color line not weakened the movement.

That's just history? Nope - which the Ronald Reagan Democrats of the 1980s proved. These blue-collar workers voted against their economic interests in part because Reagan was sending coded messages that he would keep black people in their place.

Of course, instances of interracial cooperation are many. Long-term alliances between masses of blacks and whites are rare, however.

Race likely helps explain two of America's not-so-proud distinctions - namely, (1) its rank as the world's top jailer and (2) its having the weakest social-safety net among the developed nations.

Many white Americans view both crime and welfare as black. And - though often not consciously - they'd just as soon jail black people as give them a helping hand.

To form an alliance amid such animosity is next to impossible. Yet, such an alliance looms as the nation's only hope for escaping the prison of race.

Gregory Stanford is a Journal Sentinel editorial writer and columnist.