

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER EDITORIAL
PHILADELPHIA, PA
SUNDAY
MAR 8 1998

New War On Poverty

Updated report offers doable, affordable solutions

In the summer of '67, President Lyndon Johnson asked a blue-ribbon panel to study why rioting had wracked Newark, Detroit and other cities, leaving blocks charred, thousands arrested, and 84 dead. Some kind of conspiracy, LBJ figured.

But the Kerner Commission got it right. Its 1968 report cited dire conditions that ignited poor blacks. Provoked by white police, they had exploded against cops, merchants and passersby. Soon after this report on urban unrest came more of the same when a witness for justice -- the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. -- was gunned down in Memphis.

Thirty years after that slum of a year, this can-do nation owes another homeward look to Bed-Stuy and Watts, and North Philly. The tide keeps rising across America, with ghettos still submerged. Millions of black Americans have made it into the middle class, but for those they left behind, life has coarsened.

This betrayal, of the American dream belongs at the top of the agenda. That was so in the late 1960s, with the nation wasting lives and fortune in Vietnam. It is true now, with the Pentagon and Wall Street triumphant. The inner city goes unspoken in a politics fine-tuned by focus groups and made timid by attack ads. So the first challenge is simply to end this silence. That's the threshold task for a new report issued by an organization dedicated to following up on the Kerner Commission: the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. Contrary to some jibes that this report is warmed-over, 1960s stuff, "The Millennium Breach" is a hard-nosed summons to action.

This Kerner update isn't a pinch of this and a sprinkle of that. Putting the emphasis where it belongs -- *education and jobs* -- the new plan rightly insists that Washington shift its priorities smartly.

The report implores Congress and the President to spend \$7 billion a year more to extend Head Start, a national success story, to all low-income preschoolers. It wants an additional \$15 billion a year to transform inner-city schools along lines of proven effectiveness.

The other big-ticket item is a \$25 billion jobs initiative to put inner-city poor to work at childcare centers, schools, low-income housing construction and other public jobs. That's sensible.

The report acknowledges that small, effective programs helping disadvantaged people often lose their winning edge when they are made larger and more bureaucratic. The answer: "Target federal funds and private match funds as much as possible to *private nonprofit* organizations for actual day-to-day implementation."

To its credit, the report says where to find the money for these investments and smaller ones in job training, drug treatment and other areas. It targets federal giveaways to agribusiness, TV broadcasters, oil and gas companies, the insurance industry -- plus an inventory of excess military weapons.

For years, Reaganites and radio talkers have used the welfare mess to sneer at anti-poverty programs. Nothing works, they say, and we can't afford it anyway. This report challenges those lies.