

The Washington Times

Kerner forecast revisited

March 13, 1998

Section: A

COMMENTARY

Edition: 2

Page: A17

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Thirty years ago after the historic **Kerner** Commission predicted a deepening racial divide in America, an offshoot group is lamenting how true that prediction turned out to be. That's a mistake, in my humble view. I think they should be celebrating how wrong the prediction turned out to be.

The **Kerner** Riot Commission was created by President Lyndon Johnson and headed by former Illinois Gov. Otto **Kerner** during a period when the nation was having about 100 civil disturbances a year. The commission famously predicted, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal."

The latest follow-up comes from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a private-sector project that includes some **Kerner** veterans and was formed to continue the commission's work.

This month, the foundation has released its latest report and, like its predecessors, it argues the gap is not only real but getting worse.

Reaction to the report from blacks and whites across the nation has been a huge, collective yawn.

The reaction mostly has fallen into two major camps. There are those who say they don't believe it, and there are those who say they knew it all along, "So, what else is new?"

I fall into a third camp. It is the realistic camp. It is the camp that says we are doing better and worse at the same time. So we should celebrate our successes and learn from our mistakes.

Not everybody wants to hear this. It is easier for many of my friends, particularly the liberal black ones, to argue that we haven't made any progress, so they can more easily justify aggressively race-specific (meaning blacks only) remedies.

And it is easier for many of my other friends, particularly the conservative white ones, to argue that we blacks have made all the progress that anything but our own bootstraps can help us make, which absolves them of any responsibility.

The Eisenhower group pretty much falls into that first liberal group. Its last report was released five years ago, a year after the 1992 Los Angeles riots. We Americans felt pretty divided during those days of Rodney King and Reginald Denny, for good reason.

But take a closer look. Unlike the riots in the 1960s, most of those arrested in Los Angeles in 1992 were not black, and many black-owned businesses were burned right along with white- and Asian-owned businesses.

What's that about one divide? Obviously we have several. Some are racial, but most are economic.

On this question, even the **Kerner** veterans practice a bait-and-switch technique. Their report announces a racial divide but speaks mostly of a class divide. In a short paragraph, it acknowledges the tremendous economic and political progress the new black middle-class has

made, then it goes on for the rest of its 200 pages to tell us what most of us already know, that the plight of today's black poor is worse than it was for the black poor of 30 years ago. Obviously, we have become more than two nations.

Economically, the gap between poor blacks (about a third of black Americans fall below the poverty line) and better-off blacks has been widening faster than the gap between poor and better-off whites.

Politically, the Democrats have become a blacker party over the past 30 years, as the Republicans have become the white-flight party. During the same period, black mayors and other black elected officials have grown from near-zero to several thousand. The black political clout has grown. Its next challenge is to break out of its ghetto and become properly represented in both major parties.

Socially, whites have de-tribalized in many ways over the past 30 years, welcoming such black icons as Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby and Colin Powell into their hearts. At the same time, many blacks have retribalized, looking inward to strengthen black institutions and offer aid and counseling to those underprivileged African-Americans whom the civil rights revolution left behind.

Discrimination still dogs the black middle-class, but most of it is a minor nuisance compared to the oppression so many of us have overcome.

The biggest divide in this nation today is between the movers and shakers and those who get moved and shaken. Over the last 30 years, many of us have begun to move up from the underclass to the upper class. More will follow. The biggest defining economic difference is education. The better educated we are, as African-Americans, the more choices we have for better income and living standards.

In this regard, the new **Kerner** follow-up report is right on target. It advises us to invest more heavily in programs that work, like Head Start, Job Corps and enriched after-school programs. But we also need something the report, which is heavily focused on government action, fails to address. We need a spiritual revival. Those of us who escaped poverty kept going in our relentless pursuit of education and success because our families and communities infused us with a relentless optimism. We had hope. We need to spread it around.