

the village VOICE

Redeeming the Democratic Party

Separate and Unequal—the Nations Within

By **Nat Hentoff** Tuesday, Jul 17 2001

There is no mystery about the political agenda needed to redeem the stunted Democratic Party of Daschle, Lieberman, and Gore.

A start on that agenda comes from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. It is the private-sector continuation of the Kerner Presidential National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which issued a report over 30 years ago that concluded,



*Photo: Andrew Lichtenstein
Federal housing for the poor*

“Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.”

For many blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and poor and working-class whites, the nation remains divided between – in a phrase with Great Depression echoes – the haves and have-nots.

For example, the Network, a National Catholic Social Justice Lobby in Washington, notes, "Approximately 43 million people in this country have no health insurance," and "that figure is projected to increase significantly by 2005 unless there is a dramatic change in national health care policies. . . . Rising health care costs now outdistance what wages and family income can reasonably accommodate. Millions of adults and children go without needed medical treatment and prescription medications because of cost."

Moreover, as Dr. Lynn Curtis, president of the Eisenhower Foundation, reports, the United States is "*the only super power in the world [that] still has about 1 out of every 4 children aged 5 and under living in poverty*, according to the National Center for Children and Poverty at Columbia University."

Bill Clinton took continuing credit for the low unemployment rate during his administration. Lynn Curtis quotes Ray Marshall – professor of economics at the University of Texas, and a first-rate secretary of labor under Jimmy Carter – who estimates that the real-life unemployment figure is "closer to 15% -- when one takes into account . . . the number of people who have stopped trying to find jobs and are therefore not counted." Also, layoffs – a euphemism for goodbye – are mounting.

The Eisenhower Foundation adds that "income differences between the haves and the have-nots are growing faster in America than in any industrialized democracy. . . . The average level of wealth of an African-American family in America today is about one-tenth of an average white family. Wealth inequality is much worse in the United States than in countries traditionally thought of as 'class ridden,' like the United Kingdom."

(All the statistics in the Eisenhower Foundation report are footnoted and cited in a speech by the Foundation's president, Lynn Curtis, that is available as the foundation's "Vision Statement." For a copy, write to Leila McDowell, Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, 1660 L Street NW, suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20036.)

The Vision Statement goes on to note that "we more than quadrupled the number of prison cells, at the same time we reduced appropriations for housing for the poor at the federal level by over 80%."

Also, today, after Clinton's Presidential Commission on Race did nothing in terms of practical policy impact, "*1 out of every 3 young African-American men is in prison, on probation or on parole, at any one time, in America. . . . One of the key reasons for this is the racial bias in our mandatory minimum sentences, especially when it comes to drugs.*"

The Vision Statement goes on to indicate what can be done to make legislators work for democracy. Some of the ways include getting all poor children into preschools and providing safe havens after school, including full-service community schools with medical and dental facilities on site. Seven billion dollars per year can expand the Head Start program to *all* eligible poor children.

Other strategies include remedial education before moving on to job training; community-based banking that can provide capital for community development, including jobs; and the kind of community-based policing that former police commissioner William Bratton tried to emphasize in New York and that can result in *accountable*, constitutional policing.

The Vision Statement provides details of these and other programs that are not pie-in-the-sky but are working in places around the country.

Much of this information is not known because of the incompetence of the media in reporting the actual deep divisions between the haves and have-nots, and what can be done about them politically. Many of those at or near the bottom—including millions of the working poor—don't know how they can get out from under.

A good many liberals who could begin to move the Democratic Party off the parched political center believe the New Democrat Tom Daschle ought to run for president in 2004. Paul Wellstone, a true populist, doesn't qualify because he isn't a New Democrat.

There are union leaders whose anger at Ralph Nader is such that they resist working – as they have in the past – with his various Public Citizen organizations and their valuable researchers.

In a February 11 *New York Times* article on the increasing “AIDS Risk for Gay Blacks,” there was, deep in the story, an epiphany of the state of the nation for the grievously unrepresented. The report said that the attention to the individual that goes with AIDS treatments has convinced some who "have little left to lose to embrace AIDS as an acceptable option" to bottomless poverty.

If you get infected, says Jamaul Roots, a prevention associate at Gay Men of African Descent, “AIDS opens doors. All of a sudden, for someone with no money, no job, and no place to live, they are eligible for AIDS housing. People give them \$20 to participate in tests. There is free health care, free acupuncture, all kinds of things for people that [were] never available before.”

This is America 2001, sweet land of liberty, where there are those who will bet their lives, otherwise of no concern to the rest of society – on AIDS.

Any ideas are welcome on how to redeem the Democratic Party as Socialist Norman Thomas did all the years he ran for president with programs that the Democrats finally had to embrace. See you in a month.