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The Two Societies

By Anthony Lewis

In light of the sorry history of discrimination and its devastating impact on the lives of Negroes, bringing the Negro into the mainstream of American life should be a state interest of the highest order. To fail to do so is to ensure that America will remain forever a divided society.

-- Justice Thurgood Marshall in *Regents v. Bakke*, 1978.

BOSTON. Twenty-five years ago today the Kerner Commission, appointed by President Johnson after terrible riots in Detroit and Newark the year before, made its final report. Gov. Otto Kerner and his colleagues warned: Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal.

For the anniversary, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation has issued a massive report on what we must do about the miseries of our urban ghettos the miseries that exploded again last year in the Los Angeles riots. It is a valuable report because it refuses to accept what so many Americans have come to believe: that there is nothing to be done about the poverty, decay and crime of our inner cities.

The report, written by the foundation's president, Lynn A. Curtis, concludes that the Kerner Commission's vision of two unequal Americas is more relevant today than in 1968, and more complex, with the emergence of multiracial disparities and growing income segregation. But it does not see this reality as a reason to give up.

The fact is, the report says, that we already know quite a bit about which investments work in the American inner city.

The focus of the report is on helping children and youth avoid the dead ends of ignorance and crime. It argues that a number of community-based programs in different cities have proved successful, and that it is time to apply their methods on a larger scale.

The methods include sanctuary, extended family, mentoring...discipline, educational innovation that motivates youth to obtain a high school

degree, job training linked to job placement... To spread those ideas the report proposes a national nonprofit Corporation for Youth Investment, funded by both private sources and the Federal Government.

Among many other proposals, one is for a National Community Development Bank. It would encourage a network of development banks like the South Shore Bank in Chicago, which has had much success in stemming urban decay and has been profitable.

To finance its suggestions, the report calls for a gradual rise in Federal spending to a level of \$15 billion a year in new money for investment in children and youth, and \$15 billion for investment in inner cities themselves. Those levels, it says, should continue for 10 years.

I asked Roger Wilkins, a leading black analyst of urban problems who was sent by President Johnson to help deal with the Detroit riot in 1967, what he thought about the report. He welcomed its insistence that we must act and that we know a good deal about what to do.

But I don't believe, Mr. Wilkins added, that any social program in the world can do for a child what a healthy, economically steady family can do.

What we must do for our inner cities.

So you have to strengthen families. That means focusing on job creation. You need income for families, earned income. Job training and placement should be centered on the aim of strengthening families.

If we recognize that necessity, we have to confront another contemporary reality: the decline of manufacturing industry in this country with the globalization of production. Strengthening the family in inner cities is dependent in that sense on President Clinton's aim of rebuilding American industry to create jobs.

There is one more aspect of the Eisenhower Foundation report that must be noted. After quoting the famous Kerner conclusion about two societies, the report has very little to say directly about race. That may reflect a political judgment.

Few white Americans want to think about remedial measures for the black heirs of centuries of discrimination. Reagan and Bush political strategy

was to arouse racial fears, and then use them as a reason to do nothing. But a divided America, damaging to whites as to blacks, will continue until we face the issue of race.