

Racial divide still deserves our attention

By Barbara Reynolds

What do you think will be the response to the doomsday conclusions in the new Kerner Report released last week?

Will white institutional power take this chilling omen seriously? Will black groups wake up and steer their own sinking ships? Will young blacks continue to dance to the beat of self-destruction?

Shortly after the 1967 riots, the 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, written by Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, predicted a troubling future. The 1968 report concluded:

- Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most whites. What white Americans have never fully understood but what blacks can never forget is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.
- To some blacks, police have come to symbolize white power, white racism and white repression. This helps to reinforce a widespread belief . . . in a double standard of justice and protection, one for blacks and one for white.
- Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal.

Some 30 years later, the new report concludes that although there has been some progress, many of those dire predictions have come to pass: "The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and minorities are suffering disproportionately. The prison system is a symbol of discrimination. A class and racial breach is widening again as we begin the new millennium."

The report backs up its conclusions:

- The official national unemployment rate is under 5 percent, but unemployment rates for young men in inner cities can be more than 30 percent.

- One in two black children now lives in poverty. The child poverty rate in the United States is four times the average of Western European countries.
- Forty-three percent of minority children attend urban schools, and in many of these schools, more than two-thirds of children fail to reach even the basic level of national tests.
- By the late 1990s, one of three young African-American men was in prison, on probation or on parole. States now spend more per year on prisons than on higher education.

What impresses me about the report is that it is not just more hand-wringing. It suggests the radical notion that by now we know what works, and policy-makers should just fund the workable. Through experience, however, white institutions often do the reverse. If something works for blacks, kill it; if it doesn't work blame them.

The report lists scores of workable strategies, from Head Start, to Job Corps, to encouraging community policing with minority officers. It also calls for common sense to stop replicating past failures, such as current welfare reform that does not allow training before a job begins.

There is the tendency to throw up both hands, and conclude nothing has changed or that racism is an incurable disease.

Not so. Institutions, communities, churches, families and individuals must fight racism. Thankfully, the White House is taking a stand. The president recently announced a five-year, \$400-million plan to increase life expectancy and health standards for minority groups, and he is working to raise the percentage of business contracts and increase the funding for civil-rights enforcement.

That, of course, is not enough. Corporations must knock down the glass ceilings that block women and people of color from promotions and hiring. Black leadership must continue to speak out against insanity of black self-destruction through drugs, homicide and the culture of violent movies and rap songs.

Unless there is a sea change, racism will continue building walls of hate, violence and hopelessness. But as the Kerner Report told us 30 years ago, this does not have to continue.