

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS

WITH JACK FORD

March 1, 1998

JACK FORD: In FOCUS this evening, updating the 30-year-old Kerner Commission Report on race and economics in America. The new version lists many of the same problems. Details now from NBC's Joe Johns.

JOE JOHNS: From 1964 through 1968, more than 250 American cities erupted in violence. They were the worst riots in US history, nearly 300 people died, 8,000 were injured, property damages went into the hundreds of millions of dollars. New civil rights laws had banned discrimination, but had not put an end to racism.

Unidentified Man: We want freedom and justice and equality, we want to be treated equal.

JOE JOHNS: Many of the big cities that burned in the 60s still bear the scars today. President Lyndon Johnson, concerned that extremist groups and perhaps even Communists were organizing the disturbances, appointed a commission to investigate.

President LYNDON JOHNSON(From File Footage): Let your search be free. Let us be untrammled by what has been called the conventional wisdom. As best you can, find the truth.

JOE JOHNS: The Kerner Commission delivered its truth after eight months of study. The violence, it stated, was not the product of a conspiracy, but the product of frustration. The report described high unemployment, low family income, poor schools and bad housing, mistreatment by police, and it issued a stern warning that an underclass was being created along racial lines. The report concluded, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white--separate and unequal."

Former Senator FRED HARRIS (Kerner Commission Member): That is more or less becoming true again today.

JOE JOHNS: Former Oklahoma Senator Fred Harris was a member of the Kerner Commission. He helped write a 30 year update for the privately funded Eisenhower Foundation, which was started to continue the work of the commission.

FRED HARRIS: And things got better in regards to race and poverty and the problems of the inner cities for a good while after the Kerner report, up until the end of the 70s. And then that progress stopped and in many ways began to reverse.

JOE JOHNS: The report found that there is more poverty in the US than there was 30 years ago, and that unemployment among blacks is more than twice the national average.

United States Representative JOHN CONYERS (Democrat, Michigan): The saddest thing of all about it is that there's been so little done.

JOE JOHNS: To change the trends, the new report recommends establishing national programs modeled on local ones with proven track records.

LYNN CURTIS (Eisenhower Foundation): If we just take all those programs that have already demonstrated success, and combine them, we have a coherent policy.

JOE JOHNS: Programs like the New Community Corporation in Newark, New Jersey, which offers a broad collection of services to thousands in the inner city every day. It operates day care centers, which serve about 900 children daily. It provides security patrols in housing for about 7,000 residents. It provides job training for inner city teens and even creates jobs in its own shopping center, complete with a Pathmark Supermarket and a restaurant. Monsignor William Linder, founded the program 30 years ago in the months after the Kerner Commission Report was released.

Monsignor WILLIAM LINDER (New Community Corporation): We need to take the lead and create the solutions.

JOE JOHNS: The update to the Kerner Commission Report cites the significant expansion of the black middle class and it recommends new laws and federally funded programs that help end the cycle of poverty for those left behind.

United States Representative CHARLES CANADY (Republican, Florida): I think that this is a report that thinks more government action is going to be the solution to all our problems.

JOE JOHNS: Copies of the report will now be delivered to the members of Congress and the White House. The authors say they do not believe the changes they recommend will be made. Joe Johns, NBC News, Washington.