

Locked in the Poorhouse Interview

National Public Radio Station WAMU

Washington, DC

March 10, 1999

Note: The following interview was on the Public Interest program. The interviewer was Kojo Nnamdi. The interviewees were Fred R. Harris and Lynn A. Curtis.

Nnamdi: From WAMU at American University in Washington, this is Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi. Thirty years ago had riots in the city streets. Then President Lyndon Johnson convened the Kerner Riot Commission to examine the reasons why. The Kerner Commission's main conclusion was articulated by the then head of the Commission, former Illinois Governor Otto Kerner.

Kerner: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal. Reaction to last summer's disorders has quickened the movement and deepened the division.

Nnamdi: This past year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Kerner Commission report -- that groundbreaking assembly of social thinkers, activists, and policy makers focused on the future of race relations in the United States. Thirty years later, the Kerner Commission's findings were re-examined. A new report, The Millennium Breach, was released by the keepers of the flame of the Kerner Commission, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation and the Corporation for What Works. It was highly publicized by major media across the nation. The Millennium Breach brought to light that, while the black middle class and black business owners are finding success in modern America, the nation continues to be troubled by racial discrimination and economic segregation. That finding also is articulated in a new Eisenhower book called Locked in the Poorhouse. The co-editors of that book join us today. Fred Harris is a former U.S. Senator from Oklahoma and a former member of the original Kerner Commission. He currently is professor of political science at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He has authored or edited some 15 books, including Quiet Riots: Race and Poverty in the United States. Senator Harris, welcome.

Harris: Thank you, very much.

Nnamdi: Lynn Curtis is President of the Washington, DC-based aforementioned Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, the keeper of the flame for the work begun by the Kerner Commission in 1968. He is a former

urban policy advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, former Director of President Carter's urban and regional policy group, and author or editor of 9 books. Lynn Curtis, welcome.

Curtis: Thank you very much.

Nnamdi: You all can join us at 1.800.433.8850, or you can e-mail us at PI@WAMU.org. Gentlemen, we exist in the middle of a time when the White House and many economic analysts say we are experiencing a prolonged economic boom. Why is it that, in light of this economic boom, *Locked in the Poorhouse* makes the argument that the Kerner Commission prediction has essentially come true?

Harris: Well, 2 or 3 reasons. One is that the recovery which the nation generally experienced hasn't been widely shared. It's a kind of Jekyll and Hyde recovery. A lot of middle class, working class and poor people never have gotten back to where they were. Wages, for example, are still about what they were a decade ago. In addition, we are re-segregating our schools and our cities so that, once again, we've got serious problems of becoming two nations. One is African American and Hispanic, the other is white. They are separate and unequal.

Nnamdi: That's the voice of former Senator Fred Harris. He is joined by Lynn Curtis of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. Mr. Curtis, is it possible that in the middle of this economic boom, one of the reasons we don't recognize the fact that things may be worse for poor people is because they are not somehow as visible as they were before?

Curtis: Absolutely. That's why in many ways the poorhouse is a stealth poorhouse. Part of the poorhouse is the prison system, which is a stealth prison -- where you don't see people. To pick up on what Fred said, the statistics are pretty clear in terms of the negatives since the Kerner Commission. Pundits talk about a full employment economy, but estimates by people like former Carter Administration Labor Secretary Ray Marshall are that the real unemployment rate is perhaps 15%. During the 1980s, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. The working class got poorer. The middle class stayed about the same, so it lost ground to the rich. Today, after 7 years of economic expansion, 1 out of every 5 children in America still lives in poverty. We're re-segregating. Today, the states spend more on prison building than on higher education. In the early 1990s, 1 out of every 4 young African-American men was in prison, on probation or on parole. Today, it is 1 out of every 3. Part of that is due to the racial bias in our drug sentencing system -- where people who are convicted for crack cocaine, used disproportionately by minorities, get longer sentences than people who are convicted for powder cocaine, used disproportionately by whites. At the same time, prison building has

become kind of an economic development and job generation policy for rural white folks. That's in spite of the best study on prison building today, by the National Academy of Sciences -- which concludes that, in and of itself, the criminal justice response to crime amounts to running in place. When you combine the statistics on income and wealth and poverty and segregation and prison building, you see that there are many negatives, and they just are not brought to light by the media.

Nnamdi: Did the riots that took place in the mid-1960s, particularly in Newark and Detroit in 1967 and of course in Washington in early 1968, focus the nation's attention on poverty in a way in which it has not quite been focused since then, Senator Harris?

Harris: I think that's true. President Johnson had to call out the Army to help in Detroit, for example, with terrible riots then, also in Newark and so many other places. He set up the Kerner Commission. He asked the Commission 3 basic questions: What happened? Why did it happen? And what can we do to keep it from happening again and again?

Nnamdi: You point out in the book that at the time when he put the Commission together, President Johnson actually believed that it might have been a conspiracy that caused this to happen.

Harris: That's right. I think that he was relying, among other things, on the reports of the FBI and others. I think he thought that, somehow, outside agitators, that was a popular word then, had somehow caused these riots. But the Kerner Commission was quite clear about that. We said very plainly that the hostility levels were so high in all of these cities that any kind of spark could have set off the riots, and that there had been no conspiracy whatsoever. What we did say is this. We couldn't conclude why violence occurred in one place and not another. For example, why not in Washington in 1967, but in Washington in 1968 after Dr. King's assassination? Why in Watts in Los Angeles in 1965, but not in 1967? We can describe with particularity the conditions that existed in the places where these disorders occurred. We said they are places of very high unemployment, low family income, criminally inferior schools and bad housing. Therefore, we said we've got to do something about that. If you are going to get at the real causes, particularly jobs, you've got to invest in education and training. Well, we made progress on all aspects, really, of race and poverty because the civil rights laws were just going into effect then. We made great progress for about a decade after the 1968 Kerner Report. Then the progress slowed and stopped and, in many ways since then, we've gone backward.

Nnamdi: Senator Fred Harris and Lynn Curtis are co-editors of the book, *Locked in the Poorhouse*. Fred Harris, of course, is the former Senator

from Oklahoma, and Lynn Curtis is President of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. This is a look at poverty in America, thirty years after the Kerner Commission Report. You can join us at 1.800.433.8850. Or, you can e-mail your questions to us at PI@WAMU.org. Lynn Curtis, one of the reasons I raised the issue about whether or not the riots themselves led to a greater visibility of the problems of the poor is based on a personal observation. In preparing for this interview, last night, we had a snowstorm here in the District of Columbia. A month ago we had an icestorm. There were a great many reports on how this affected commuters, and the ability of people to pick their children up. During the course of the icestorm, there were reports on the areas of the city which may have been affected by breakdowns in electricity. I have yet to see a report on how homeless people were affected by the snowstorm, and how poor families were affected by the snowstorm. What happened in public housing as a result of the lights going out? It seems to me that we tend to see poor people when we see crime stories on television, but, when we are talking about the welfare of the entire region in the middle of a snowstorm or an ice storm, they tend to disappear from our radar screen.

Curtis: Yes, that is the case. It is also the case that there is poor planning by local government around here. Where I grew up, in the Midwest, if you are a Mayor and you don't get the snow removed soon, you're out of a job. In terms of planning, you make me think about the riots in Los Angeles in 1992. There was a CBS/New York Times poll that asked a national sample whether Americans would be prepared for more planning and more programming in terms of jobs and education in inner-city neighborhoods. A majority said "yes," but the next question in the poll was, "What's the major obstacle to doing more?" A majority of people in the poll said the major obstacle to doing more was lack of knowledge. Often we are told we don't know how to do things. But the reality is, we do know a great deal about what works. The issue really is political will, not lack of knowledge.

Nnamdi: Indeed, Locked in the Poorhouse talks about possible solutions to some of these problems, but before we get to them, Senator Harris, there are those who ask, "How can you say things have gotten worse when we have seen an unprecedented expansion of the black middle class -- and when black business owners seem to be more successful than they were thirty years ago?"

Harris: That's absolutely true. We know, for example, back then we didn't see any black people in the media, in newspapers or television or radio, to speak of. We didn't have very many African Americans on police forces or as mayors. As I said, the affirmative action laws and civil rights laws that were just going into effect back then eventually did allow many African Americans to enter the middle class. There is no question about that.

We've certainly made great progress, in general. But now what's happening is this. Poverty now is greater than it was then. We have more poor people. There were 25 ½ million poor people back in 1968. Today, there are 35 ½ million poor people. That's a greater percentage, too. That's 13.3% of our population. For those who are poor, poverty is worse. That is, there are more people deeply poor who have families that have incomes of less than 50% of the poverty line. In addition to those things, poverty is more concentrated. Back then, half of the poor people lived in metropolitan areas. Today, 77% do. In those metropolitan areas, as people have moved out to the suburbs, including some black people, what's left behind is an area where you don't have as many institutions, churches or places where people can get connected up with jobs.

Nnamdi: When we think of cities, we think of the industrial centers of the country. This book points out that in 1967, Detroit had a population of some 1.6 million. The population of Detroit is now under a million people. But what happens to the industry? What has been going on in cities that make them different than they were in the mid-1960's?

Harris: Good point. For example, you could come into Detroit, as thousands and thousands of African Americans did from the south after World War II, and find a darn good paying job. Then, a lot of those central-city jobs disappeared altogether, with new technology. A lot of them moved to the suburbs. A lot of them moved out of the country. The new jobs that were created were jobs with high technology and high education requirements -- mostly out in the suburbs, where it is hard for poor people to get to. Or, they were low pay service jobs. That has left a whole group of people in the central cities without jobs that pay enough to make a living on, and so we've got a lot of working poor. People are working as hard as they can work, but still can't get out of poverty. It's that concentrated poverty that causes extra problems. Where people are densely packed, children grow up in that kind of concentrated poverty. The studies all show that they are likely to have cognitive development problems. Their chances for success are just not anywhere as good as they would have been in the old days, even when central cities were better than they are now.

Curtis: That's why in the report we concentrate on the breach between those left behind in the inner city as well as in pockets of rural poverty, on the one hand, and the rest of us on the other. But we, as well, also talk about another breach, which is not nearly discussed enough -- and that's between the rich and the super rich, on the one hand -- and the middle class, working class and the poor on the other hand. We advocate for a new alliance among the middle class, working class and the poor to bring the rich back to the bargaining table.

Nnamdi: You make the argument, or you indicate that the statistics show, that the top 1% in America has more wealth than the bottom 40%.

Curtis: That is the result in part of trickle-down, supply side economics giving tax breaks to the rich. During the 1980s, the federal government increased taxes on the poor. So to implement the kind of employment and education investments, we are talking about, we don't need new taxes. We need to finance what works through, for example, reductions in corporate welfare and affirmative action for the rich. We spend between 100 and 200 billion dollars per year on affirmative action for the rich and corporate welfare. Just a small part of that could finance a full employment program for the inner city.

Nnamdi: Explain what you mean by affirmative action for the rich and corporate welfare.

Curtis: For example, in the 1980s, there were over \$70B in tax breaks to corporations and the rich in the form of liberalized depreciation allowances and reduced capital gains taxes. There also are enormous subsidies that we give, for example, to the timber industry and the mining industry and the aviation industry and the nuclear industry and the agricultural industry. We subsidize the tobacco industry to give cancer to our children. That is not only cost ineffective budget wise, but it's immoral.

Nnamdi: How do you reply to those people who say that part of the reason for prolonged inter-generational poverty is the welfare system? Everybody agreed at one point that welfare reform was needed. Now we do have welfare reform. Do you feel that the cycle of dependency that welfare was accused of creating for so many generations can be broken by the welfare reform legislation that we now have in place?

Harris: Well, so-called welfare reform has been very cruel. As somebody said the other day, we don't want to attack poverty and the problems of poverty, so we attack welfare. We know how to reduce welfare. That is, just cut people off. We have reduced the welfare rolls, but we haven't reduced poverty much, because we've got a lot of people now who are just going to have an increasingly difficult time making it. What we've got to do, among other things, is renew the job and training programs that were cut so severely, beginning in the 1980s, and also provide, if necessary, public service jobs as a back up. We have plenty things that need to be done. If people are going to get off and stay off welfare, they need jobs. We haven't done enough.

Curtis: One strategy that failed is the notion of an enterprise zone -- where, for example, you give tax breaks to corporations so they move

back into South Central, Los Angeles and employ young African Americans. Enterprise zones didn't work, in large part because those young people didn't have education and job training. But present welfare reform is based on work first, and that's a sure path to failure for many in the inner city. The key indicator, as Fred said, is not getting people off of welfare, but reducing child poverty.

Nnamdi: You make the argument that, in some areas, we know what works in education. We'll get back to that in a second, but because most of the minority and Hispanic children who are poor are in the public school system and because the public school system in cities is not doing well, many or most of those young people are not getting the kind of education for which they can be prepared to enter the work force in a profitable manner. There are those, generally conservative, who make the argument that, okay, what we need to do, then, is give vouchers to these kids -- so they can go to private school. What would be your response?

Curtis: First of all, there are many successful public school reforms -- like safe havens after school, where kids come for help with homework from adult role models; the Comer School Development Plan, where parents and teachers take over management of public schools; full service community schools, where nonprofit community groups, like El Puento, in Brooklyn, partner with individual public schools; and the Ford Foundation's Quantum Opportunities program, where adults mentor public high schoolers. So we can base policy on already proven school reform within the public school system. In terms of vouchers, my response is that the issue is not choice. We already can choose successful public school innovations. Actually, the issue is accountability. You don't want to spend public dollars on private institutions where there is no accountability. Ultimately, the issue is resources. The rich like to say that money is not the answer. But they send their kids to Andover and Exeter and spend \$18,000 a year. If it's good enough for the rich, it might be good enough for the rest of us.

Nnamdi: The name of the book is Locked in the Poorhouse. The co-editors are Fred Harris and Lynn Curtis. Fred Harris, the former Senator from Oklahoma, now a professor of Political Science at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Lynn Curtis, President of the Washington, DC-based Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation -- the keeper of the flame for the work begun by the Kerner Commission in 1968. This is Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi. We are taking your questions and comments at 1.800.433.8850. Let's go to the phones and talk with Matthew in Fairfax, Virginia. Matthew, you're on the air. Go ahead please.

Matthew: Yes, Kojo. I just wanted to put in my 2 cents about the education part of this whole equation. It isn't just the education of the

poor. It's also a question of the education of the rich to the plight of the poor. More than worrying about all these other options you have in school that really don't make a lot of sense -- like spending their time on sports. We should be educating everyone. I am just saying our entire educational system is inadequate -- from the rich to the poor.

Nnamdi: When you say from the rich to the poor, do you mean the education system is inadequate both for the rich and the poor?

Matthew: Yes I do. In the sense that the rich are taught what the rich think they need to know about getting ahead and staying rich. They are not necessarily taught what they should know about the poor -- why the poor are poor.

Nnamdi: Okay, Matthew. Let me see if we can get a response to your issue.

Curtis: I think education is very important. I'm talking about educating people that solutions exist. We need to start a Communicating What Works movement, in which we let average American taxpaying citizens know that the solutions are not tax breaks for the rich and prison building for the poor. There are concrete school reforms that can work. There are reforms that can work for the middle class as well as for the poor. But few people are informed. Most Americans get their news from local television. Often, local television has a philosophy of "if it bleeds, it leads." Often, local television leads with negative news, stories that demonize minority youth, and stories that demonize welfare mothers. We need more programming that shows the solutions that are out there, that give hope to the American people.

Nnamdi: Let's talk about solutions, for a while. What is it that we know that actually works?

Harris: Well, some things we know that are fairly easy to know. One of the worst things that came out of the Reagan and Bush years was the idea that government can't do anything right, and that everything we tried failed. The fact is that the things that we tried, mostly, worked -- we just quit trying them, or we didn't try them hard enough. For example, we know that Head Start works, and, yet, we're only serving 1 in 3 eligible children right now with Head Start. Early childhood development works. So do job and training programs. Those are some of the things that work. We've reduced the part of the budget that dealt with those kinds of programs, including the percentage of the budget that we spend on education.

Curtis: Solutions that work are interdependent. Community-based policing works to stabilize neighborhoods, which encourages community-based banking, which generates capital for community development corporations, which create jobs for "training first" programs. Similarly, the Ford Foundation Quantum Opportunities Program can keep kids in high school. They can get that far if they've been in Comer programs and safe havens during middle school. They can get that far if they've been in preschool. So what works is multiple solutions to multiple problems. There is a sense of comprehensive interdependence to what works -- across all the years of a child's and youth's life.

Nnamdi: But what we are dealing with here, Senator Harris, is political will, or the lack thereof. We have a Congress of the United States in which conservative ideology is very strong. That ideology argues that the government is really not very good at solving the problems of poor people. That should be done by the free marketplace, so to speak, and that the free marketplace will only be allowed to thrive if we get rid of a lot of regulations that restrict what corporations in the free marketplace are able to do.

Harris: Well, I know that that's a kind of Republican and conservative philosophy, but I don't think it's the philosophy of the whole public. You can be somewhat optimistic about the times now. For one thing, we've got this huge budget surplus. We are not strapped for funds. We're still, of course, spending far too much money on the military, 10 years after the cold war ended. But we've got a lot of money despite that. In addition, economic inequality has become worse in the last decade. More than 60% of the people really are in the same boat now. We've got a great opportunity, I think, to put together middle class, working class, and poor people as a majority in this country. And, I think they can reorient the policies of the country. I think that there's a coalition that can be built around a common self interest which involves a majority of our people.

Curtis: I would add that the naysayers are not always against big government. They are for big government when it comes to corporate welfare. They are for big government when it comes to the military. They are for big government when it comes to bailing out hedge funds for billionaires. It's a double standard. When it comes to programs for the poor, though, many of the successes are carried out by indigenous community-based nonprofit organizations. So the federal government ought to be responsible for raising money, but then it should direct the money, not through the states, that's another layer of bureaucracy, but right to the grassroots where the folks who are most successful are operating.

Nnamdi: And a number of those folks are involved in faith-based ministries in local jurisdictions.

Curtis: Some of them are. There's a new fad now of giving money to faith-based organizations. I think we have to be a bit careful. The important point is that community based nonprofit organizations seem to be among the most successful venues for implementing what works, whether it be crime prevention, youth development, education or jobs. Some of those organizations are secular, some are church based. Some of the secular groups work and some don't. Some of the church based groups work and some don't. It's not church versus non-church. It's whether you're effective or ineffective as a nonprofit organization.

Nnamdi: The number to call: 1.800.433.8850. You can e-mail us at PI@WAMU.org. Let's go to Lee in Washington, DC. Lee, you're on the air, go ahead please.

Lee: Hi. Good morning. Thanks for having me on. My question has to do with President Clinton's Initiative on Race, which, as you all probably remember, started in mid-1997 and ended last year. I think it was sort of an attempt to address some of the same issues. I wanted to see it address more economic issues. But I think President Clinton felt that there was something beyond economics that was race related. He really felt like we needed to build some consciousness through discussions -- before people would be ready to recognize some of the problems that are out there. I just wondered if your guests had any comments on the President's Initiative and the role of open discussion in tackling some of the problems of poverty.

Harris: I was very, very pleased when the President organized the race initiative. A great American, Dr. John Hope Franklin, headed up the race initiative. I think that is highly important, and it signaled a change in the government's attitude. One of the reasons why we began to go backwards in regard to race and poverty, after about 10 years of following the Kerner report, was government action. Under Reagan and Bush, the United States Government was in the courts against civil rights enforcement and affirmative action. They were hostile. That had some very serious consequences. With the Clinton Administration, we reversed that. That's evidenced by this dialogue that the President wanted to start. I thought that the report were very good. I wish they'd had more emphasis on poverty and the intertwined problems of race and poverty. That's what we're trying to do with this book, *Locked in the Poorhouse*.

Nnamdi: Lee, thank you very much for your call. Let's move on to Ed in Falls Church, Virginia. Ed, you are on the air; go ahead please.

Ed: Thanks very much for accepting my call. I just wanted to thank you for your show. I really appreciate listening to you. My comment is 2-pronged. One is in the area of economics and particularly in the indigenous neighborhoods, minority neighborhoods. The other is in the area of training, which in itself can be translated into economics, providing that training offers indigenous groups jobs. In the area of the neighborhoods and businesses, I see a significant amount of immigrants who have opened small businesses in minority neighborhoods. A variety of businesses have opened, and these businesses, of course, generate income, good income, in the neighborhood for the immigrants. I see a lot of competition in the areas of training.

Nnamdi: Is the competition between the African Americans and immigrants?

Ed: Well, not just African Americans. But I would say poor groups.

Nnamdi: Competing with whom? Competing against whom?

Ed: Well, like this. For example, let's say, if you go into minority neighborhoods, or if you go into an indigenous neighborhood, at a certain economic level, you'll find that technology is a thing that doesn't really register there. So what you have is this big cry for high tech workers in our country, and particularly here on the east coast. We're getting an influx of immigrants from overseas in response.

Nnamdi: Okay, I got the gist of your question. Let me see if I can get a response. Thank you.

Harris: Well I don't know much what to say about that -- except I think that one reason why we've seen this growing inequality in the country is the advent of technology, of computers and so forth. I think the training that is so required today for the good paying jobs is unequally available. We've just got to do a great deal more about that, in our schools. Inner-city schools and the kids who go there must have access to this kind of modern technology and training. One reason why we've had growing economic inequality is that there's been a growing gap between those who have some post-secondary education and those who just have a high school education. There was a time, as we all know, when, if you had a high school education, that was really a great accomplishment and led into some good jobs. Well, today that is just not enough. So we've got to really get back to spreading around this modern training and education. More than that, we've got to work with at-risk youth and with people in the inner cities, particularly, in getting into jobs and training. Lynn Curtis and the Eisenhower Foundation have been very much involved with that.

Curtis: I think the "training first" rather than "work first" notion is very important. If you're poor, you often need education and training. Workers often need retraining. Middle class people often need re-education and retraining for the global marketplace. Education and training is a common political ground. That is one basis for a new political alliance among the working class, the middle class and the poor.

Nnamdi: Ed, in all of the studies that I have seen, there is no indication that immigrants operating small businesses in minority communities, or immigrants who are getting high tech jobs on a temporary basis, are costing African Americans or Latinos significant numbers of jobs at all. Lawrence, in Northwest Washington, you're on the air, go ahead please.

Lawrence: Yes, how are you?

Nnamdi: Good.

Lawrence: I am so glad to talk to these two gentlemen because I do a lot of speaking on race and I've used the Eisenhower Commission report and the Kerner Commission report. Remember that, in 1957, when President Eisenhower wanted to establish the highway system, he didn't say the purpose was economic. He said the purpose was a matter of national security. I think we ought to take 3 issues: income inequality, race and immigration. We ought to say to Bill Gates, look, you and I have some mutual interests. They relate to stability in this country. I went to the President's Initiative in Washington, and I gave this speech, and, then I went to Mississippi and I gave it. The difference in the response is that the University of Mississippi now is establishing an institute that deals with race and income inequality. If anyone wants to talk to the person who's doing it, she's Sue Glyson at 601.232.5993. My point is that, if we can fashion national security around these three issues, we can perhaps save this country. But we've got to build not only the kind of forum and the kind of new economic constituency that your two excellent guests have been talking about, but we have got to fashion it in such a way that everyone has an interest beyond altruism.

Nnamdi: Okay. Thank you very much. Lawrence Guilliot is a former organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and he is from Mississippi. He knows whence he speaks when he talks about Mississippi. Mr. Guilliot, thank you very much for your call. Any comment?

Harris: That was very good. I was glad to hear about what's happening in Mississippi. Yes, what we're talking about does involve national security, and somehow we should get people to see that. We're not just going to be the kind of safe and secure economically strong, socially strong society we

want to be if we have this indigenous and continuing poverty, if economic and racial segregation continue to exist. It doesn't make economic sense. We spend money to try to help developing countries, and here we've got an underdeveloped country right here in our own midst. If we'd invest in it, the result would be better markets. Such investments would make a great deal of economic, fiscal and national security sense.

Curtis: The highway system reference was interesting. This country has developed through public infrastructure investments -- in the railroad system, in the highway system. Much of the initial development of computer technology was public investment. Today, especially as a result of divestment in the 1980s, we are way behind other industrialized countries in investing in our public infrastructure. There are untold jobs that can be created in inner cities and other parts of urban areas that are public investments -- like YouthBuild USA, where Dorothy Stoneman in Massachusetts trains high school dropouts to repair and rehab housing for the poor.

Nnamdi: This is Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi. The name of the book is called, *Locked in the Poorhouse: Cities, Race and Poverty in the United States*. We are talking with the co-authors, former Oklahoma Senator, Fred Harris and Lynn Curtis, the President of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. Let's go back to the phone. Dave in Silver Spring, Maryland. You are on the air, go ahead please.

Dave: Hello, Kojo.

Nnamdi: Hey, Dave.

Dave: What a great privilege to talk to your two distinguished guests. I just wanted to comment briefly that, for the last 28 years, I have worked for an agency that started out as one of the premier war against poverty agencies under the Johnson Administration. For most of the last 28 years, that agency has been funded, not just at a poverty level, but at an absolute starvation level. In the early years of the Reagan Administration, we lost 95% of our staff. What this has meant is that, routinely, the agency that I work for is castigated for inadequate monitorship, oversight, evaluation and technical assistance to the local programs that we fund. Interestingly enough, the funding to the local programs has remained relatively strong -- but the federal ability to monitor, evaluate and provide technical assistance has been cut virtually to nothing, so that we are basically a chronic, bureaucratic basket-case. Virtually every year all or part of our agency is slated for dismantlement, and, for some reason, we finally get written back into the federal budget at the last minute.

Nnamdi: Okay, allow me to ask our guests to what extent does that indicate that the federal government not only may be finding it difficult to be efficient, but that there is a deliberate effort to undermine efficiency by cutting funds for federal agencies that monitor success of these programs?

Curtis: That has happened. For example, funds for management of Head Start programs were cut by Congress, and then the next year Congress criticized Head Start for being poorly managed. I think we need to have adequate resources for technical assistance and capacity building. Indigenous nonprofit groups need to build capacity before they can become self sustaining. So we need the resources, but they ought to be targeted from the federal level to the grassroots level where it makes the most difference. There are some federal programs that ought to be cut because they are not cost effective. There are some that are very cost effective, like Head Start and Job Corps. They ought to be replicated to scale, to all persons who qualify.

Nnamdi: Scott at Washington, DC, your turn.

Scott: Hello. Thank you for taking my call.

Nnamdi: You're welcome.

Scott: I'm not certain who made the comment, whether it was Mr. Curtis or Senator Harris. But they talked about too much spending on the military. I just wanted to point out my personal experience. I'm a high school dropout, lived on welfare for quite a number of years, joined the military, was able finish high school, and got a college education. In fact, I've got two master's degrees, and I've got very good technical skills. My brothers and sisters all followed the same route, and they were able to unlock that key to the poorhouse. They did that through education and training provided by giving a public service to the country -- the military. I don't think you can spend too much on the military. I think that that is a way out of the poorhouse. The military is an extremely diverse organization. There are people from all different cultures. Possibly not the rich, but other cultures. It's a great way to get out of that cycle of poverty.

Harris: Well, in terms of diversity within the military, I've been all over the world and been on our military bases and so many places here and everywhere and that's absolutely true. It shows what you can do. I think that people of diverse races and ethnic backgrounds can work together, quite productively. We ought to duplicate that, replicate that in our general society, not just in the military.

Scott: Exactly.

Harris: But let me say something further about the military and the opportunity that it gave you. We don't want to put money in the military as a kind of WPA make-work-project. That's not the function of the military. Why couldn't we strengthen education and job training and opportunity, generally, without having to do it through the military? We certainly can. We don't need to have this nutty idea of an anti-ballistic missile system we felt we'd shot down back during the Reagan Administration. Now we're back to it again. We don't need to continue those kind of wasteful expenditures. They are wasteful in that we don't get as much turnover with that kind of money as we do if we put it into jobs and training and education in the domestic economy. So here's an interesting thing about what you say about your opportunities, which have been broadened as a result of the military service. I was just looking the other day at a television program about the GI Bill of Rights, after World War II. What an enormous economic impact we had from investing in these young men who were coming back from World War II. Why do we have to invest in people only after they have served in the military, or after they've come back from war? Why couldn't we see the benefit in investing in them in the first place?

Curtis: A great example of the military being a wonderful model is the Gulf War. We won the Gulf War in the early 1990s with adequately paid staff, adequately paid support staff and good equipment. Yet, when it comes to programs in the inner city, we are told that resources are not available, and that we have to use volunteerism, self sufficiency and empowerment -- words often used by politicians who don't want to invest in our children and youth.

Nnamdi: That's the voice of Lynn Curtis. He is a co-editor, along with Fred Harris, of the book *Locked in the Poorhouse: Cities, Race and Poverty in the United States*. They have been our guests this hour. Gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us. You can visit the Public Interest website at www.wamu.org or e-mail us at PI@wamu.org. This is Public Interest. LAC/at Revised: September 20, 2000 (10:08pm)