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## Still Two Societies

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*What will it take to end the continuing shame of America's cities?*

The silver anniversary of the Kerner Report is being used to argue that there's hardly a silver lining in the dark cloud of despair that lies over America's inner cities. Television shows and newspaper columns are drumming home the message that in the last 25 years America has moved even closer to becoming what the pessimists forecast in 1968: "two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal."

That was the conclusion of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, created by Lyndon Johnson. It is more commonly known as the Kerner Commission, for its chairman, former Illinois governor Otto Kerner.

The recent spate of publicity stems from a 25th anniversary report published last week by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. It expresses "grave doubts about whether the gridlocked American federal political process would ever or could ever enact informed solutions to the problems of the inner cities and the persons who live in them."

The clear and most recent evidence for that gloomy conclusion involves the absent Washington response to last year's Los Angeles riots. For a few weeks, the destruction that followed the Rodney King jury verdict had big-name politicians, starting with George Bush and Bill Clinton, touring the burned-out areas of south-central Los Angeles and vowing action.

But in the end, Congress passed little aid, and even that was vetoed, right after the election, by the lame-duck president.

Is the situation, then, as hopeless as it seems? Fortunately the answer is no. The Eisenhower Foundation itself suggests that local experiments and a few national programs (notably Head Start) have shown that investment in children and youth, combined with investment in housing and effective drug and crime prevention, can change urban environments and the lives of people dwelling there.

What is needed now, the report argues, is a big chunk of money--\$30 billion a year for the next 10 years, for starters--to allow these local

experiments to be reproduced and to finance infrastructure projects and education programs.

President Clinton is proposing only a fraction of that amount and is allocating some of it to market-oriented programs, like enterprise zones, which the Eisenhower Foundation dismisses as "the fool's gold" of the 1980s, along with such concepts as "volunteerism, self-sufficiency, partnerships and empowerment."

That judgment is likely to strike many, as it did me, as a doctrinaire way of stigmatizing a whole range of ideas which may not be panaceas but could, as Eisenhower Foundation president Lynn A. Curtis concedes, contribute to the solution of urban problems.

The second problem that I have with the report is that it minimizes what cities and their residents can do--and are in fact doing--for themselves. They are doing it in large part because they have to. According to the League of Cities, federal aid fell by 50 percent between 1982 and 1992. But they are also doing it because they have found that it works.

Cutting waste has made it possible for some cities to hold the line on taxes while encouraging neighborhood redevelopment ventures. The April 1991 issue of *Governing* magazine reported on how many cities are trying to sweat the fat out of their own bureaucracies. Last week's *Wall Street Journal* highlighted such efforts by Philadelphia's new mayor, Ed Rendell. As Jonathan Walters noted in his *Governing* article, until the commercial real estate market collapsed at the end of the 1980s, that decade saw massive reinvestment in the down-towns of many big cities.

Perhaps more significant was the rebirth Walters noted in urban neighborhoods from Washington's Capitol Hill to Cleveland's Buckeye-Woodlands and Memphis's Whitehaven. These are being fueled less by massive outside investment than by the sweat equity of two-earner families moving into well-located and convenient parts of town and reclaiming them from the blight that had overtaken them.

But notwithstanding such heartening countertrends, the threat of isolation in poverty, unemployment, crime- and drug-ridden neighborhoods remains a real one for millions of center-city blacks. And as long as their frustration festers, the threat of recurrent urban violence remains as well.

It will take a lot to reverse that downward cycle of isolation and despair--more than this country has put into it in the 25 years since the Kerner Report was issued. It will take money, but it will also take youth mentors--some perhaps from the reduced ranks of the military services, some from the national service program President Clinton has promised. And it will

also take more from the inner-city residents themselves---especially measures to reduce the appalling illegitimacy rates. Their contribution is critical--but so is the whole society's commitment to end the shame of the cities.