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The Kerner Commission Report and the Failed Legacy of Liberal Social Policy

by Stephan Thernstrom, Fred Siegel, and Robert Woodson, Sr.

Heritage Lecture #619

This lecture was held at The Heritage Foundation on March 13, 1998.

Welcome to our panel discussion on the 30th anniversary of the publication of the Kerner Commission Report.

The Heritage Foundation has a number of goals. One is to roll back the liberal welfare state. A prerequisite to understanding what happened to create the liberal welfare state, and to accomplishing the goal of rolling it back, is understanding the liberal welfare state itself, its origins, and the thinking that led to its creation. There's no better place to start than by closely examining the so-called Kerner Commission--its history, its recommended policies, and its recommended solutions--and by honestly evaluating how these policies have fared, 30 years later.

In August 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson created the Kerner Commission, which was named after its chairman, Illinois governor Otto Kerner. Eight months later, in March 1968, the commission submitted a 426-page report that, interestingly, became a best seller with over 2 million copies sold. Looking back on the Kerner Commission, it resembles a Who's Who of liberal elites back then, including New York mayor John Lindsay, Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Oklahoma populist senator Fred Harris.

The Kerner Commission is known best for its conclusion that the United States is moving toward two societies--one black, one white; separate and unequal. The report looks into the causes of the many urban riots and concludes, "White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture that has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II." The report also concludes that a massive redistribution of income had to take place to remedy this problem. It also suggests the addition of 1 million government-created jobs, the institution of a higher minimum wage, significantly increasing welfare benefits, spending more money on education and housing, and so on.

Three themes emerge from the Kerner Commission Report, which our panelists today are uniquely qualified to address. The first is the condition of race relations and the condition of racial minorities in the United States. The second is the success or failure of the social policies advocated by the commission and other liberals during those years. The third is alternatives to those policies that promised to improve the lives of our poorer citizens and revive our communities--inner cities especially.

First, you will hear from Stephan Thernstrom. He and his wife, Abigail, recently co-wrote a monumental work on race relations in the United States today: *America in Black and White*. Thernstrom is an award-winning professor of history

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at Harvard University, editor of the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups as well as many other books.

Our second panelist is Fred Siegel, who recently wrote an excellent book that analyzes the negative effects of liberal social policies in three major U.S. cities: New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. Professor Siegel's book is *The Future Once Happened Here*. A native New Yorker, Professor Siegel teaches at Cooper Union for the Arts and Sciences in Manhattan. He's a senior fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute, and used to work as an editor at *Descent* and *City Journal*; he also formerly was a columnist for the *New York Post*.

Our third panelist is Robert Woodson, a pioneer in encouraging non-governmental, faith-based solutions to the social problems that the Great Society and its many programs have failed to address. Mr. Woodson recently published an excellent compilation of his work and his vision of how to overcome the forces that dragged down so many of our citizens: *The Triumphs of Joseph*.

The Kerner Commission Report Lacks Credibility By Stephan Thernstrom

In the quarter-century between the entry of the United States into World War II and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the position of black people in the United States radically improved more than in any other comparably brief period in U.S. history. The possible exception of this would be the Civil War and Reconstruction years. By the mid-1960s, the civil rights revolution in the United States had accomplished its original goal, the destruction of the legal foundations of the Jim Crow system. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and its companion piece, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, marked the end of that long road.

These measures applied nationally, but there were no serious barriers to black voting in any northern state; most northern states with significant black populations already had their own laws barring discrimination in employment, education, and public accommodations.

Federal law might be enforced more vigorously, but solid majorities of northern whites believed discrimination was wrong and should be illegal. By 1965, a rapidly growing minority of southern whites was coming around to that view as well. Racism and discrimination had not disappeared from the land, obviously, but legal barriers to black advancement had been destroyed, and the remaining obstacles seemed impervious to attack through protest marches and non-violent resistance. That is what the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., meant when he said in early August 1965, "There is no more civil rights movement. President Johnson signed it out of existence when he signed the voting rights bill."

Obviously, the civil rights movement did not go out of existence. Instead, most civil rights leaders redefined their objectives and abandoned their long commitment to the principle that, as John F. Kennedy had put it, "Race has no place in American life and American law." Civil rights leaders began to argue that African-Americans had been denied their "fair share" of income, wealth, good jobs, political offices, and seats in institutions of higher learning, and that the only effective remedies were racially preferential policies. The riots that erupted across the land between 1965 and 1968 were part of the explanation for this transformation. Dr. King spoke on the eve of the great riot that exploded in the Watts section of Los Angeles on August 11, 1965. Over the next three years, by one count, 329 "important" racial disturbances took place in 257 cities, resulting in nearly 300 deaths, 8,000 injuries, 60,000 arrests, and property losses in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

With so many cities in flames, many Americans were persuaded that extraordinary measures were necessary to

restore civic peace. The official analysis of these disturbances by the body President Johnson appointed to investigate them--the Kerner Commission--blamed them on persisting "white racism," and argued that riots would become a regular feature of urban life unless the federal government launched massive programs to ensure black progress. Both the diagnosis and the proposed remedies were highly dubious, but they established the liberal orthodoxy on racial issues for a generation. Even before the pervasive mood of panicked impatience created by the riots and reflected in the Kerner Report, liberal thinking about racial policy had taken a momentous turn. Two Johnson Administration documents that appeared months before the Watts riots--the March 1965 Moynihan Report and President Johnson's Howard University speech the following June--departed strikingly from the original civil rights vision.

The Moynihan Report, officially a Department of Labor report on "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," was prescient in identifying the disintegration of the black family as the chief source of the social problems afflicting African-Americans. It was savagely denounced for "blaming the victim," and its author was called a racist by many that should have known better. The assault had the tragic effect of deterring all public discussion of the black family until quite recently, despite steadily mounting evidence that the skyrocketing rate of out-of-wedlock births (now at a horrendous 70 percent) and the prevalence of female-headed households is closely linked to educational failure, crime, and other pathologies.

Despite all the furor over the alleged "conservatism" of the Moynihan Report, it started from radical premises that quickly were echoed by civil rights activists. The opening pages of the report rejected the traditional ideal of equal opportunity as the goal in favor of equality of results for racial and ethnic groups. Now that the "demand of Negro Americans for full recognition of their civil rights" had been met, Moynihan wrote, the "expectations" of African-Americans inevitably and properly would move "beyond civil rights." "The evolution of American politics" had "added a profoundly significant new dimension" to the "traditional egalitarian ideal." This "new dimension" was the expectation of blacks that "in the near future equal opportunities for them as a group will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups." Without "equality of results," there would be "no social peace in the United States for generations."

Although Moynihan had collaborated with Nathan Glaser in writing *Beyond the Melting Pot*, published only two years earlier, his report endorses a utopian aim that never could be fully realized in the ethnically complex society portrayed in that volume. *Beyond the Melting Pot* shows that the Irish, Italians, and Jews of New York all climbed out of poverty and made socioeconomic progress since their initial arrival, but certainly not that all three groups achieved "roughly equal results" in occupations, incomes, rates of college attendance, or any other measure of social status. And the blacks and Puerto Ricans of the city lagged far behind them, and were not on a trajectory that would bring them socioeconomic equality "in the near future."

Moynihan claims that achieving "equal results" is "what ethnic politics are all about in America, and in the main the Negro American demands are being put forth in this now traditional and established framework." (This, of course, is very difficult to reconcile with his insistence that a "profoundly significant new dimension" had been added to the American "egalitarian ideal." How could equal results for groups simultaneously be a part of both the "traditional and established framework" and a "profoundly significant innovation?") His scholarly work with Glaser certainly does not demonstrate that traditional "ethnic politics" has brought about equal results for groups; to the contrary, Moynihan preserves a little wiggle room for himself by specifying that the results for groups need be only roughly

equal, but it takes a really broad definition of "roughly" to square with the inter-group socioeconomic differences so evident in Beyond the Melting Pot.

President Johnson's June 1965 speech at Howard University built upon this line of argument, not surprisingly in light of the fact that Moynihan was its principal author. The freedom recently extended to African-Americans, said Johnson, was "not enough": It was "not enough just to open the gates of opportunity"; it was necessary to make sure that all had the "ability to walk through those gates." The goal was "not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and a result."

The most powerful and oft-quoted passage in the Howard University speech is

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say "you are free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.

This was the central argument in favor of remedial racial preferences. As Shelby Steele has pointed out, it reeks of condescending paternalism. The black subjects of this sentence are passive and helpless, who can hardly walk, much less run, because of the chains whites had put them in. What whites had done, only other (more benevolent) whites could undo.

The ideas that equal outcome for groups, rather than equal opportunity for individuals, is the goal; that blacks are too crippled to compete on equal terms with whites; and that all social problems in the black community are the result of white racism past or present thus all received official sanction by Johnson Administration officials before Watts exploded in August 1965. Appearing three years later, the Kerner Report interpreted the riots as evidence of the truth of these assumptions.

This is not the place to criticize the work of the Kerner Commission in detail, a task Abigail and I take up in our recent volume, *America in Black and White*. Suffice it to say that the report does not satisfactorily answer the elementary question of why the riots occurred when and where they did. Because the commission took for granted that the riots were the fault of white racism, it would have been awkward to have had to confront the question of why liberal Detroit blew up while Birmingham and other southern cities--where conditions for blacks were infinitely worse--did not. Likewise, if the problem was white racism, why didn't the riots occur in the 1930s, when prevailing white racial attitudes were far more barbaric than they were in the 1960s?

Although its analysis is deeply flawed, the Kerner Commission was a great success--if we measure success in terms of how many people have subsequently referred to it as if it had biblical authority. The commission was wildly mistaken in its claims that the socioeconomic condition of black America was deteriorating, and that the country was splitting into "two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal." Even more mistaken have been the pessimists who continue to claim, despite superabundant evidence to the contrary, that "almost every problem defined by the Kerner Commission has become worse." To deny the dramatic progress in the status of African-Americans and in race relations that has been achieved in the past 30 years is perverse and dangerous.

--Stephan Thernstrom is Winthrop Professor of History at Harvard University.

THE KERNER COMMISSION REPORT DID MORE HARM

THAN GOOD
By Fred Siegel

The man I want to speak about today is a ghost. It's often said during the debates of the Constitutional Convention that the man who wasn't there helped write the convention letter; the ghost of Oliver Cromwell was riding through the debates. John Lindsay's ghost rides through these debates. John Lindsay is now a much-forgotten man. When Nora Sayer recently re-issued her collection of essays, *Going on 60s and 70s*, which was a very popular essay collection 25 years ago, she dropped all the Lindsay essays, which in the first edition comprised about one-sixth of the book.

I ran into Sayer recently at a party, and I asked her why. She said that no one knows who John Lindsay is anymore. I told her, "Actually, people don't know, but wouldn't it be nice if they did--you know, if they learned something about him?" Sayer just laughed and continued on. I think it was wise on her part. It wouldn't fit with the theme of the rest of the book, but just to close the circle on this opening thought, it's important for you to know that John Lindsay's hero was Cromwell. He brought a crusade and a little bit of what Professor Thernstrom was talking about--a crusading, moralizing spirit--to policy.

Why is Lindsay important? It's not just that he was the primary author of the Kerner Commission Report, or that he was the driving force behind it; it's that he was the one who actually put these policies in place in one city. When I hear the mantra, the every-ten-year mantra Professor Thernstrom talks about--"if only we had done these things"--I know these things were done. They were done in one city--my city--New York. I should tell you, just as background, that I live in an integrated neighborhood in Brooklyn. I like it. I love cities. The reason I'm interested in this is because I was very unhappy to see what was happening to my city, and to other cities.

It's difficult to overestimate how much influence Lindsay had on the 1960s. He was on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*. He was very handsome, very photogenic--and not very bright. When you run into people from the Lindsay Administration, many of whom have had second thoughts, the conversation can quickly turn to the question of which was the bigger Lindsay disaster: The welfare explosion or the battle of Ocean Hill-Brownsville? Let me talk about these two because they are the two moments in which Lindsay attempted to put into practice the logic of what the Kerner Commission report represented.

The first was the welfare explosion in 1965. New York City had a black male unemployment rate of 4 percent. We were in the midst of the greatest economic boom in U.S. history. The city was thriving. Five years later, there were 600,000 more people on welfare. Now, this was a tragedy in many ways, especially for the city's African-Americans. They were on the up escalator of jobs and participation in the economy, but they were pulled off the up escalator and shunted off into welfare. The effect on the city was twofold: Fiscal calamity and family breakdown. It's fascinating that this policy was specifically chosen.

In "Broken Cities: Liberalism's Urban Legacy" in the March-April 1998 issue of *Policy Review: The Journal of American Citizenship*, Steven Hayward quotes an infamous New York City welfare commissioner whom *The New York Daily News* dubs "Come and Get It Ginsburg." The city actually was advertising for people to come on to welfare. What was the logic? It was the logic of the Kerner Commission Report. It was the sense that African-Americans were so damaged that what they needed was not help making it into society, but a respite from society; in effect, they should be pensioned off.

People sometimes argue that this welfare explosion was the price of good intentions. Nonsense. The theorists behind this movement are two people named Piven and Cloward,

who are still alive. It's difficult to imagine how they get through the day knowing what they did, but they seem to do it. One's at Columbia University, and other is at City University of New York. Their logic is that, if you expanded the welfare role sufficiently, you would bankrupt the city, force a political crisis, and set people at each other's throats. The idea was that New York was at a median point, so if New York exploded like this, then the rest of the country would have to respond. Well, they succeeded in part. People were at each other's throats, and the city did go bankrupt.

You simply can't add that many people to welfare. This is difficult to imagine, but in 1965, New York was not a particularly high-tax place. I don't mean that we were ever low. We taxed all sorts of things that no one else would think of taxing, such as moving vans. But we weren't off the charts. Five years later, however, we were off the charts, and the city's economy was heading straight downhill. That's one disaster, a disaster for which we really haven't fully recovered even today. People talk about the drop in welfare rolls under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. It's true, but we are back only to 1989 levels.

The second disaster was the creation of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district. What ties these two disasters together is the sense that Mayor Lindsay held strongly that rural immigrants with semi-literate pasts, without any skills in an urban economy, had nothing whatsoever in common with earlier immigrants. Now, the argument that blacks were just like immigrants of old was wrong. But the sense that they were completely different from immigrants of old is also wrong. People coming from rural backgrounds without the kinds of academic skills you needed to make it into the economy need to be acculturated.

New York's schools, like those in Washington, D.C., at the time, were integrationist in their ideology, and both were judged highly successful using a contemporary standard. That model was destroyed in the name of a kind of multiculturalism. And what happened at Ocean Hill-Brownsville was a conflict so intense, so vicious, so hostile, over black separatism in the schools that the people in the city were literally at each other's throats.

Let me tell you what happened, and I'll tell you how Jason Epstein, one of the resident geniuses at the New York Review of Books described it. There was broad support in New York for decentralization. Once Tammany Hall was gone, there was no way to access government horizontally. From the 1940s, Ed Costikyan, one of the city's wisemen, was able to build broad support for decentralization. Unfortunately, the first attempt at large-scale decentralization occurred around schooling, and it intersected with the rise of black nationalism. The New York teachers union turned into the kind of time-serving, self-interested bureaucracy people claim it is, but it had not reached that point yet in those days. The teachers union had been active in the civil rights movement and had supported even decentralization.

Despite this, Mayor Lindsay double-crossed the union. He brought in McGeorge Bundy, fresh from Vietnam, even though he knew very little about Vietnam or the Vietnamese. He also knew very little about New York City, eastern New York State, or black Americans. That didn't stop him. Nation-building had failed in Vietnam, but he was determined to make it succeed in eastern New York State. He also was going to impose an essentially black nationalist regime on the schools in New York City through a man named Rhody McCoy, now forgotten even to New Yorkers who follow these things. He ended up as a professor, fittingly enough in the education department of the University of Massachusetts.

Essentially, decentralization got hijacked and, without stretching, it was taken over by thugs. There was a lot of

violence; teachers were threatened; blacks and Jews were at each other's throats. It was right after the Six Day War: Jews were feeling newly empowered, and these two groups clashed.

Jason Epstein went to McCoy to tell him that, at that point, the city had two choices, that is, it could restore the teachers to that school district either by "exterminating every black in New York City or by capitulating entirely." Now, neither of those things happened, fortunately, but neither did the schools ever recover. One of the great economic mechanisms of New York, and one of the great civic mechanisms for integrating people into the larger society--integrating them into the economy--was destroyed, and it has never been repaired. It's constantly reexamining itself and reshaping itself. It's like Soviet-era agriculture: It's constantly reforming itself, but never succeeding.

So, I would suggest that in New York we actually see the Kerner Commission played out on the ground. In the one case, welfare replaced work for low-income people who were ready to move up the job ladder. In another case, race became the central factor of the curriculum (and the only factor of curriculum in Ocean Hill-Brownsville).

One final point on Mayor Lindsay: His authority to lead the Kerner Commission was due to the fact that his city was the one that had not burned. You will recall that New York City had only minor disturbances that didn't fit the official qualifications the Kerner Commission Report had laid out. Having been there, however, and having been in some of them, it was hard for me to tell the difference. As a personal note, I was in the Newark riots, the Pittsburgh riots, and the more recent Crown Heights and Washington Heights riots, and I was in some riots in New York City in those periods that did not qualify by the Kerner Commission standards but that didn't look very different to me.

I would suggest that part of this reputation is undeserved, but not exactly in that way. It was undeserved in the sense that the measures Mayor Lindsay took to keep the lid on were as destructive--if not more destructive--to the city than the riots themselves because they caused financial bankruptcy and the destruction of the school system. That is the legacy of the Kerner Commission in New York City.

--Fred Siegel is Senior Fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute.

**DIFFERENT CAUSES OF POVERTY REQUIRE
DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS
By Robert Woodson, Sr.**

Like others on this panel, I, too, was a liberal Democrat. Michael Novak recently described a neo-conservative as a progressive with two teenage daughters. I guess having teenagers really alters one's view of the world--even one's politics and philosophy.

I am a product of the civil rights movement, having led demonstrations in the 1960s. I left the movement--or, rather, the movement left me--over three issues. One was forced bussing for integration. I fought against segregation. The opposite of segregation is desegregation with the goal of pluralism, not forced integration. Integration was a matter of choice. I also parted with the movement on the issue of affirmative action when the goal of equal opportunity became a demand for equal results. I fought for an equal opportunity to compete, not a guaranteed percentage of the trophies. When I found that the plight of poor blacks was being sacrificed on the altar of civil rights, that's when I left the movement permanently and began to embrace a much larger agenda to empower those who had been left behind.

On October 25, 1965, a very revealing article by William

Raspberry, who then was a reporter for The Washington Post, was published with the headline; "Poor Negroes Are Not Benefiting from the Civil Rights Gains." Continued emphasis on political participation and race-specific remedies would not benefit those who were most in need. We needed to focus on strengthening those who had been prepared least to walk through the doors of opportunity.

Martin Luther King constantly challenged conventional wisdom and the consensus of the majority. Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" had a powerful influence on me. He said that the greatest stumbling block to black progress is not the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderates' acquiescence that lukewarm acceptance from those of good will is more difficult to tolerate than outright hostility of those who harbor ill will. He was talking about patronizing policies. Dr. King asked, "What good does it do to have the right to sleep in a hotel or to live in a neighborhood if you don't have the economic means to exercise that right?" He died assisting people to attain the means to exercise those rights by accumulation of wealth and achieving economic self-sufficiency. It is with this point that my life's goal changed.

I also would like to reflect on some points that I discuss in my recent book, *The Triumphs of Joseph*. It is interesting that, when the civil rights movement emerged, racial discrimination was affecting all blacks in the same way. At that time, you could talk about the "black community" as a single entity. Once the Civil Rights Act was passed, that situation changed. No longer did all blacks suffer equally; those who were equipped to take advantage of opportunities could advance. There was a rich tradition of economic development and self-sufficiency among free blacks even during slavery. It is interesting, however, that the advocates of civil rights had to abandon publications that discussed the strength of black communities in order for them to have civil rights laws applied to them. With these demands, we entered a "grievance period" in which we reported only on our shortcomings and our failings. This had devastating results on attitudes and goals. In addition, the civil rights movement was incubated in the same womb as the poverty movement. Therefore, the moral authority of one was extended to the other. Criticizing poverty programs meant being called a racist. It legitimized a victim mentality and undermined a spirit of self-help and personal responsibility.

As we conducted interviews among many older blacks who were active in the business arena, we found that 68 percent of those blacks who are second-generation college graduates were born into entrepreneurial households. These were the people that had nice houses, small businesses, and barber shops. These entrepreneurs tended to convey the importance of education to their children. Unfortunately, this entrepreneurial legacy was abandoned by black leaders in the 1940s and 1950s. As a consequence, there was a rapid decline in the entrepreneurial activity within the black community. Our history of success was lost, and we took on the role of victims to racism who were trapped in poverty. Personal incentive to escape the situation was dead.

If economic conditions and race were the sole predictors of outcomes in the black community, then why was it possible during the Great Depression that 82 percent of black families had both fathers and mothers raising their children? Current economic conditions are nothing in comparison with those of the Depression, during which time there was negative growth in gross national product with an overall unemployment rate of 25 percent for all Americans. This meant an unemployment rate of about 40 percent for blacks. This was also a time in which blacks had neither political representation nor judicial representation. Worst of all, they were being lynched every day. Despite these odds, they achieved and maintained strong family units. In 1863, when 1,000 blacks were fired from the docks of Baltimore, people did not march on Washington,

D.C., demanding jobs, peace, and freedom. Instead, they established the Chesapeake Man Drydock and Railroad Company, which operated successfully for 18 years.

Revisionist history has been communicated to our young people. When I spoke to 200 black MBAs from the finest graduate schools in this country, I learned that not a single one knew anything of the rich entrepreneurial past of black Americans. Consequently, there has been an ascendance of a leadership class within the black community that is grievance-oriented. There are many middle-income blacks who have a proprietary interest in the grievances of the black community. The poverty industry has joined forces with the race-grievance industry, and together they suppress reform that could have the power to uplift those low-income people in the black communities.

In order for us to embrace an agenda that truly empowers people, we must stop this bait-and-switch game in which conditions of the poor are used to justify preferences for all blacks. When the remedies are designed on the basis of race alone, they primarily benefit those in the upper classes. The greatest income gap today is not between the white community and the black community; it is between low-income blacks and upper-income blacks. Sociologist Robert B. Hill conducted a study, "The Strength of African American Families," which reveals that, between 1970 and 1990, the number of black families with incomes between \$35,000 and \$75,000 grew 200 percent. Black families with incomes exceeding \$75,000 increased 300 percent in number. Unfortunately, the number of black families with incomes below the poverty level also expanded 150 percent.

If we are to address the problems that low-income blacks face, we must move beyond race to embrace policies that change the rules of the game. It is not the sex or race of the ruler that determines who wins and who loses in the marketplace; it is the rules of the game. Those who are in the race- and poverty-grievance industries fail to explain or answer some troubling questions. For example, if racism is the primary cause of inequalities, then why are black children failing in systems run by their own people? Why is it that, in 15 separate categories of poverty expenditures, Washington, D.C., leads the country, spending about \$9,000 per student in education, yet Washington, D.C., is dead last when it comes to the academic performance of its students? A Harvard study reveals that a black child born in Washington, D.C., today has a life expectancy 15 years lower than a child born just across the river in Virginia. The life expectancy of a black boy born in Washington, D.C., is exceeded by a child born in Haiti, a country with the lowest life expectancy in the Western Hemisphere. This is a time in which blacks are running the school system, the foster care systems, and the failing housing programs. Yet, at the same time, middle- and upper-income blacks living in Washington, D.C., are prospering. The ranks of that group have exploded. We have an unfortunate situation in which there are perverse incentives to maintain classes of people in poverty. Still, we are prevented from addressing this situation because, whenever criticism is valid, an issue is raised to prevent us from engaging in thoughtful debate and discussion.

The National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise focuses on remedies and recognizes that we must move to a different paradigm that goes beyond a Left and a Right. The Left believes that all you have to do is spend more money on affirmative action and poverty programs. We reject that notion. We also reject the strategies of some on the Right, however, that believe that all we must do is cut those programs. I call them cheap Democrats and cheap liberals because they are not offering a different approach. Let us begin to redirect our focus of attention and look for remedies among the people suffering the problems.

In truth, we cannot generalize about the conditions of any race of people, whether they are black, white, or Hispanic.

When we were involved in a racially segregated society, we may have been able to generalize, but we cannot do that now. I was on the Jim Lehrer NewsHour one time with Maralee Evers, an architect that made a million dollars a year, and John Jacobs of the Urban League. Lehrer asked me, "What is the state of black America?" I answered, "For those on the panel, life ain't bad. Our income has not gone down in the past 20 years regardless of which white man was in the White House."

Although we must stop generalizing about blacks, we still are able to generalize about poor people with dysfunctional families. Yet, even in the case of poor people, we should make a distinctive difference between those who are poor because they lack opportunity and need only a job and affordable housing and those people who are poor because of their character and the choices they made. For the latter, we must embrace a different kind of intervention.

The "Josephs" of this world are people living in those impoverished neighborhoods who themselves have been broken but continued to embrace a faith in God. It is they who have emerged victorious; they became character tutors and moral counselors to others. As a consequence, they help the people they serve to change their own lives. They become healthy, whole, and "work-ready" people by changing their own values. The crisis we face is primarily a cultural crisis; therefore, we must monetarily and verbally support those Josephs who represent healing agents in these neighborhoods. Once men, women, and young people are called to responsibility, they will be able to take advantage of jobs, education, and housing.

Recently, U.S. News & World Report published a four-page spread of one such grassroots effort that we support in Benning Terrace, a neighborhood in Southeast Washington, D.C., that at one time was overrun with violence and drugs. At one time, it was one of the most dangerous communities in the country. Since the arrival of the grassroots healers, called the Alliance of Concerned Men, who guided warring factions through a peace agreement, there has not been a single death in the neighborhood in which violence had once claimed the life of one young person each month. Ever since the truce was established at Benning Terrace, we have received 14 requests from young people throughout the District of Columbia who want to bring an end to the violence in their neighborhoods. They have begun to ask how people achieve in spite of poverty, and how we can invest in those people to achieve further success. We should look to those who have achieved success in those inner-city environments and study what they did.

I challenge both conservative and liberal scholars, who are able to make their reputations and careers without ever studying a single poor person. That must change. We need to move away from bipolar ideological debates and direct our energies toward low-income healing agents. We should go into these low-income neighborhoods and begin to inquire as to how many people living in these communities are raising children who are not dropping out of school or using drugs and going to jail. We also must ask them how they are able to achieve in that environment.

Any time we say, "60 percent of households are generating teen mothers," that means the other 40 percent are not. I do not see, however, scholars rushing in there to ask, "What is happening with the other 40 percent?" and "What are they doing that works?" We have much to learn from these "Josephs" from which we can begin to construct policies.

Unfortunately, a very cynical view about poor people prevails. The greatest barrier that the poor face is not racism; it is elitism. We assume that poverty makes people not only frustrated and dispirited, but also stupid. Therefore, we refuse to inquire among the Josephs of this world what it is they are doing. It is critical that we seek

out strategies that will get beyond the deadlock of today's current debate. The crisis we face as a country is fundamentally spiritual, and its answer lies in supporting the moral centers of influence that exist in our communities.

Today's moral crisis is not just a problem of the inner city. In Fairfax County, Virginia--one of the most affluent communities in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area--affluent teenage children from two-parent households are experiencing the same kind of crisis of spiritual emptiness that we are seeing in the inner city. As a result, drug addiction is up, drug sales continue to rise, theft rings are being organized, and gang violence is rampant, as they are in many suburban communities. At this critical time, our attention should be focused on the moral and spiritual freefall in which we find ourselves and searching for remedies to this ever-apparent crisis. The byproducts of spiritual revitalization will be racial reconciliation. With this in mind, it still is important to realize that racial reconciliation will not yield moral and spiritual rejuvenation.

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