

Statement of Fred Harris at the Forum on “50 Years after the Kerner Report,” sponsored by the Democratic Whip Task Force on Poverty, Income Inequality and Opportunity, 2:30pm-4:00pm on Thursday, May 17, 2018, in HVC-215, U.S. Capitol Building, Washington, DC

## 50 YEARS AFTER THE KERNER REPORT<sup>1</sup>

Fred Harris<sup>2</sup>

I am honored to be here to speak about the 1968 Report of the Kerner Commission, on which I served, in the formation of which I had a hand, and of which, now, I am the lone surviving member—but also to speak about where we are today on the issues of race and poverty, which were covered by the Kerner Report and which were the life’s work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated fifty years ago, as well as what can and must be done, now, about these intertwined issues of race and poverty, fifty years later.

“A physician’s warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life.”

That’s the way Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the 1968 report of President Lyndon Johnson’s National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (called the Kerner Commission after its chairman, Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois).

Partly at my suggestion—I was then a United States Senator--President Johnson had appointed this blue-ribbon citizens commission in the wake of the terrible riots and violent protests that exploded in the black sections of many American cities during the long hot summer of 1967, with great loss of life, awful human injury and enormous property destruction—and causing great shock, fear, alarm,

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is based on Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, eds., *Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report*, Temple University Press, 2018.

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bewilderment, and anxiety throughout the country. The worst disorders, in Newark and Detroit, were not finally quelled until the president had sent in U.S. Army troops.

President Johnson charged the Kerner Commission to investigate the riots and recommend action, not only from a law and order standpoint, but also in regard to their deeper causes. "Let your search be free," the President told the commission members. "Find the truth and express it in your report." And that is exactly what the commission famously did, which, as it turned out, not only shocked the conscience of the nation, but greatly upset President Johnson, as well.

The Kerner Report condemned violence and lawlessness in the strongest terms, saying they "nourish repression, not justice," and then came its basic finding: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."

"Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans," the report stated further, adding, "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro 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."

Great and sustained national efforts were required, the Kerner Report said, not only to combat racism, but also poverty—through programs against unemployment and low wages, poverty, inferior or inadequate education and training, lack of health care, and bad or non-existent housing. The report also made strong recommendations for improving the conduct of the media and the police, and for needed integration of housing and schools. These recommendations applied to all Americans, "rural and urban, white, black, Spanish-surnamed, American Indians and other minorities."

But, misinformed about its contents and distracted by the Vietnam War, President Johnson rejected the Kerner Report (and this is particularly sad because President Johnson did more against poverty and racism than any other president, before or since). The report thereafter was purposely

leaked to the media by a person who wanted to lessen its impact—before the commission could, as planned, background reporters so they would fully understand the reasons for the commission’s findings and recommendations. This leak resulted in hastily written news stories which appeared throughout the country the next morning and which carried shocking headlines, something like: “White Racism Cause of Black Riots, Commission Says.” Many people never learned “the rest of the story.” Not surprisingly, there was considerable backlash in the country.

Still, many American leaders spoke out in favor of the Kerner Report, including, in addition to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Senator Robert Kennedy.

And despite the opposition, America made progress on virtually every aspect of race and poverty for almost a decade after the Kerner Report. Poverty was being substantially reduced. Housing and schools were being integrated. The achievement gap between African-American and white students was being reduced at such a rate that, had that rate continued, there would be no achievement gap today.

The Kerner Commission knew that oppressed people often come to believe the same bad stereotypes about themselves that the dominant society holds—and that peaceful, but strong, standing up to the dominant society, confrontation, can change that. We knew that the most fundamental change that had occurred in 200 years of black-white relations was that African Americans changed the way they looked at themselves, and that made white people change the way they looked at African Americans. Soon, Women, Hispanics, Native Americans, and other minorities profited from the example of the black civil rights movement, and changed their own self-images, too.

But with jobs alarmingly disappearing through globalization and automation, with conservative political change and, eventually, with unfriendly U.S. Supreme Court decision and congressional cuts in both taxes for the rich and the big corporations and in programs that benefitted poor and middle class Americans, progress was slowed or stopped, and, finally reversed. Some improvement occurred, of

course, during each of the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama administrations, but regression has been the trend since the late 1970s—and that is true today.

There is still far too much excessive force by police, too often deadly force, especially against African Americans. White supremacists have become bolder and more violent. Housing and schools have been rapidly resegregating, locking too many African Americans and Latinos into slums and their children into inferior schools.

As the nation has grown, our overall poverty rate has stubbornly remained virtually the same, while the total *number* of poor people has increased from a little over 25 million to a little over 40 million (2016). The rate of child poverty is greater today than in 1968, and the percentage of Americans living in deep, or extreme poverty, has grown since 1975. Ever since the 1970s, the African American unemployment rate has continued to be about double that for whites. Latino and Native American unemployment continues high, as well. Labor union membership has shrunk from about 25 percent of private jobs to about 6 percent. Inequality of income in our country has greatly worsened. In the 1970s, the richest 1 percent of Americans took home something less than 9% of total national income; by 2016, they took home 24%. Fifty-two percent of all new income in America has gone to the top 1 percent.

Rich people are healthier and live longer. Where's the fairness in that? They get a better education, and a better education produces greater inequality of income. Then, that greater economic power translates into greater political power.

So, where do we go from here?

We know what needs to be done, and we know what works. A more progressive tax system, making rich people and big corporations pay their fair share. Stopping tax and spending subsidies that redistribute wealth and income in the wrong direction. Strengthening unions and eliminating the legal and other barriers which impede the right of workers to organize. Raising the minimum wage to a living wage, which would be a giant boost to the economy and bump up middle class wages, too. We need

more affordable housing, and housing and schools integrated by income and race. We also need re-regulation of big banks and big finance. Better incomes for those who can't work and who can't find work. A sound, free public education for all—from early childhood through college. Education and training, with special attention to those put out of work by circumstances beyond their control. Health care for all. The basic American principles of equal rights and equal opportunity for all—whatever a person's social standing, zip code, religion, gender, or color. Investment in infrastructure, in science, in alternative energy and in technology. Investment in ourselves.

How can we get these things done when present times are so politically tough?

First, we can take heart from the fact that the great civil rights movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis and others, began in a terrible and depressing time of Jim Crow, rigid segregation and harshest racism—and still they courageously resisted, persisted and ultimately prevailed. I like the way my friend Jesse Jackson described Dr. King in the *New York Times* on the anniversary of his assassination (April 4, 2018): “A radical, antiwar, pro-immigrant, champion of the poor.” Just before he was killed, Dr. King was organizing a Poor People's Campaign, the stated goal of which was: “Jobs and Justice.” And the reason why he was in Memphis, when he was assassinated, was to support a local garbage workers' strike.

We can take heart, too, from the fact that the polls show that the majority of Americans support the measures we must now adopt and the steps we must now take.

We can take heart from the fact that we live in a time of unprecedented, growing and powerful people's activism—with great new efforts and organizations, like the Women's March, Indivisible, Black Lives Matter and, most recently, the student-led and wonderfully diverse and multi-cultural March for Our Lives.

Finally, the Reverend William Barber of North Carolina, founder of the rapidly spreading Moral Mondays movement and a new Poor People's Campaign, is right when he says, “We can't keep fighting

in our silos. No more separating issues—labor over here, voting rights over there. The same people fighting one should have to fight all of us together.” Reverend Barber is pointing the way we must go, showing that white, black, Latino, Native American and other Americans can join hands in coalition with each other and with women, millennials, seniors, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and others to work for their common interests—because, as I like to repeat, “Everybody does better when everybody does better!”

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