

THAT THESE DEAD SHALL NOT HAVE DIED IN VAIN

By Fred Harris

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Over a half-century ago, the Kerner Commission, of which I am the lone surviving member, famously condemned and demanded an end to the terrible white racism and fundamental inequities that have so long plagued our country. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the 1968 Kerner Report to America “A physician’s warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life.”

Has America now finally chosen death over life? I don’t think so, but the horrible police murder of George Floyd, which we all witnessed on live television, has forced us all to face up to that question. We are grief stricken and sick at heart. We are mad as hell and fearful for the future of our country. Millions of protesters have taken to the streets, coming back again and again, day after day.

The Kerner Commission was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson after the terrible riots and violent protests that exploded in the black sections of many of America’s cities during the “long hot summer of 1967”—with great loss of life, human injury and property destruction. Today’s demonstrations and protests seem to me to be quite different from the disorders and protests of 1967. They seem much larger to me, for one thing, much more widespread and longer lasting, and they cut across ethnic, racial, gender, generational and economic-class lines. That’s very encouraging. Plus, there is far, far less violence now than there was in 1967 (although there has still been some, particularly at the start, seemingly often committed by outsiders who may have had their own separate agendas). The Kerner Report rightly condemned violence and lawlessness, saying that they “nourish repression, not justice.”

The Kerner Commission's famous finding was: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal." Great new national efforts were required, our Report said, not only to end racism, but also to greatly expand social programs, including those against unemployment and low wages, poverty, inferior or inadequate education and training, lack of health care, and bad or non-existent housing, as well as for needed integration of housing and schools. These recommendations applied to all Americans, "rural and urban, white, black, Spanish-surnamed, and American Indian and every minority group." The Report also made strong recommendations for police reform—to make the police look like, be a part of, and reflect the values of the communities they were sworn "to protect and serve"

For nearly ten years following the Kerner Report (and in some instances, longer), America moved forward in the fight against racism and poverty. During that near-decade, housing and schools were being integrated. The Black-White achievement gap in reading, for example, was narrowing at a steady rate. There was a remarkable increase in the number of African Americans and Latinos elected to public office and of African Americans and Latinos who rose to the middle class and into all aspects of American life. (And, of course, America was eventually to elect an African American President.)

But, then, too many good jobs began to leave the country or to disappear. Politics and government took a dread turn to the right. Before long, the courts became unfriendly, too, and Congress started cutting taxes for the rich and the big corporations, as well as programs that especially benefitted poor and middle class Americans. Progress in the fight against racism and poverty 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 mostly been the trend since the mid-1970s—and that is the situation today.

Everybody is appalled that 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 notably resegregating, locking too many African Americans and Latinos into slums and their children into inferior schools. And way too many Native Americans are in deep poverty. As America's population has grown, the overall poverty rate has persistently remained virtually the same, while the total *number* of poor people has markedly increased. The inequality of income and wealth in our country has grown far worse. And all these bad social and economic indicators have been further worsened by the awful Covid-19 pandemic—especially for people of color and the poor.

So, where do we go from here? We must keep the memory of George Floyd, and the many others like him, as well as the more than 100,000 Covid-19 dead, so many of whom would have been saved by timely federal action, in our hearts, and we must vow, with Abraham Lincoln “that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

We must stay mad as hell a little longer—to November, at least—and change our government.

And when we do, we know what needs to be done, and we know what works: basically, just follow the Kerner Commission recommendations on racism, inequity, and inequality of wealth and income. Make needed trade-offs: cut the military and increase early childhood education, for example. Change the culture and training of the police. They should be demilitarized and made more the faithful representatives of our better selves. I take heart from the new Congressional Black Caucus proposal in Congress, as well as beginning local starts, to reform the police and make their practices more legal, humane, and transparent, more subject to real civilian control and oversight. These are good first steps. So are the discussions about

“defunding” the police, which I take at least to mean reinvestment in Black communities and reallocation of resources to social services, community-based strategies, and civilian crisis responders.

No, we don’t need more militarization of any kind in this country, nor more polarization. We need more *communitization*. There’s an enhanced role for civil society, here. Every community in America should set up a representative commission to work together, not to study our problems—we’ve studied them to death—but to act, locally!

We’ve got a chance to get it right this time, maybe our last chance. And I have increased hope that we will. My informed opinion is that a majority of Americans are ready to do what needs to be done. I see more progressive activism in our country today than ever before in my lifetime—with great new efforts and organizations like the Women’s March, Indivisible, Black Lives Matter, the Poor People’s Campaign—and, right now, today’s demonstrators and protesters.

I say as often as I can that the Reverend William Barber, of North Carolina and the Poor People’s Campaign is so right in declaring: “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.” If White, Black, Latino, Native American, Asian-Pacific Island, and other Americans join hands in dedicated coalition with each other and with women, millennials, seniors, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and others to work for our common interests, the declaration of his brothers at the Houston funeral service, “George Floyd is gonna change the world,” will come to pass, and every human being in this country will be able to say with assurance, “I can breathe!”

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