



DR. TUKUFU ZUBERI

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the landmark report issued by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Known as the “Kerner Commission Report,” it assessed the causes of the race rebellions that occurred in this country during the 1960s and concluded that there was a link between these rebellions, the level of ignorance, discrimination, poverty, and unemployment among African Americans, and the media’s failure to report fully on the concerns of African Americans.

The ugly head of racial conflict is never far from the front pages of current events. More recently, the worst of race relations was reflected in the Jena Six case involving the arrest of six African American students in Central Louisiana. Suddenly, the problem of race fell out of the closet. Once again we were left standing with our mouths open and trying to answer three basic questions: “What happened?

WHERE ARE WE 40 YEARS AFTER KERNER?

By Tukufu Zuberi

Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?” These are the same questions raised in the “Kerner Commission Report.”

The Report forecast that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.” Of course, for African Americans the existence of Jim Crow segregation was all too real. The “White only” signs were an every day reminder that the United States of America was already racially separate and unequal. However, the assumption of the Kerner Report reflects the hidden history of race in America. When the racial problem is at its worst, the political discussion tries to hide the historical impact of race. This was true in the 1960s, and it is true at the beginning of the 21st century.

The very act of placing a picture of Barack Obama on the cover of U.S. News and World Report next to the question “Does Race Still Matter?” is a blatant act of media racial confusion and a reflection of persistent efforts to hide the history of race in America. It is an admission that race still matters.

To address these issues we assembled teams of African American journalists and scholars to reconsider how far we have come since the Kerner Report. This Kerner Plus 40 project is a collaboration between the Center for Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and

the Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies at North Carolina A&T State University. Our efforts crossed the color line, as well as the disciplinary limitations of the academy. The complexity of addressing racial dynamics in the context of democracy required a new approach that allows for an exploration of issues raised in both the academic and public spaces. We accomplished this by bringing together a unique partnership between an Ivy League school and an historically black college and by giving scholars and journalists the infrastructure and public platform to facilitate their collaboration and communication.

As Dewayne Wickham, Director of the Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies at North Carolina A&T State University, explained: “Reporters used the historical record, the fruits of their independent research and interviews, and their interactions with the academics who collaborated with us” to produce the report.

The Kerner Plus 40 Report reveals that we have a long way to go, before we can all say that “we see only Americans.” The color line is very real and anyone who turns a blind eye to it, risks helping to aggravate the problem.

Progress has been made. We have more African Americans in the middle class, many more African Americans complete high school and go to college, and Bob Johnson and Oprah are common names throughout the land. However, this progress has been offset by the backlash against affirmative action, the over-imprisonment of African Americans, crumbling inner-city schools, and the racial disparities in wealth.

Complicating the situation are the changing demographics of our society. At the time of the Kerner Commission Report, America was a racially divided nation, and issues could be clearly seen in terms of black and white. Forty years after the Kerner Report the new demographics have transformed the picture. To discuss

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KERNER COMMISSION’S WORK REMAINS UNFINISHED

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We need good public policy and committed voluntary action. We must choose political leaders who include combating discrimination, poverty, and inequality on their agendas. And we need to support activist organizations that pressure elected officials for a response to these problems. We need to push private and public employers to recommit to more diversity in their work forces, and we need to develop more weekend and evening voluntary academic and recreational programs for at-risk children.

Only with a combination of non-violent protest, good public policy, and committed voluntary action can we advance the struggle for liberty and justice for all. □

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WHERE ARE WE FORTY YEARS AFTER KERNER?

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racial issues in the 21st century without reference to the conditions and perceptions of Asian American, Latin American, and Native American descendant populations, is to miss the point.

Recent immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean have conceptualizations of racial identity that are quite different from the bipolar white/black racial categories of forty years ago. For example, in Mexico the racial continuum runs from white to red, not from white to black as in Puerto Rico. Furthermore, the Puerto Rican continuum from white to black may have more to do with social status than skin color.

Black immigrants from the Caribbean and from Africa experience the United States like other African Americans. Immigrants from Europe experience the United States like other white Americans and are the beneficiaries of the privileges of white skin color that elude immigrants of darker hue.

This sort of racial classification is a way of assigning individuals a social place. How race is and has been classified in the census is an important indicator of the conflict

over racial identification. The ideas of the “Latino and Asian,” “black and white,” are formulations of racial thinking. Before 1980, the majority of Latinos considered themselves white. In the 1940s, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) protested against Mexicans in Texas being classified as “colored,” pressuring politicians and government enumerators to classify them as white.

Further exacerbating the problem is the reality that we rarely judge people of color as individuals in the society. In most cases individuals of color, no matter what their station in life, are viewed in the context of the racial/ethnic group to which they belong and their behavior is seen as a reflection of the entirety of this group. This reality helps maintain racial conflict.

The Kerner Plus 40 project sought to assess the progress towards racial equality, the decline in racial discrimination, and the coverage of African Americans in the media. Michael X. Delli Carpini, Dean, of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, summed up what we found:

“Even a cursory look at the evidence suggests that the answer is equivocal. The news media can be applauded for raising issues of race and class in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but the dearth of coverage of these issues before that catastrophic event and, more ominously, in the years since, suggests that our applause for the press should be muted... The media shows less tolerance for overt racism, but white talk show hosts like Don Imus and white sportscasters like Kelly Tilghman demonstrate how close to the surface racial stereotypes still linger... ”

“Whether one concludes that the glass is half empty or half full... one thing remains clear – it is still ‘not good enough.’” □

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VOICES FROM KERNER PLUS 40 REPORT

The Kerner Plus 40 Report looks at seven cities that experienced, in Editor Tukufu Zuberi’s words, “race rebellions” in the 1960s. They are Birmingham, AL; Philadelphia, PA; the Watts area of Los Angeles, CA; Tampa, FL; Newark, NJ; Detroit, MI; and Cambridge, MD. Reprinted here are brief excerpts from residents, journalists and academics who contributed to the report:

“After hundreds of years of slavery, I don’t think we’ll ever catch up. Racism is still alive and well in America, and in Birmingham, people are still very separated by race, but black people now have more of an opportunity to improve their lives... People have just gotten more tolerant because it’s not politically correct to be overtly racist.”

Katrina Ross, 46, Federal District Judge, Birmingham, AL

“I think things are better in terms of race relations in Birmingham, but I also think that people just feel more comfortable being around people who are like them... I think now we’re viewed more as an equal. In many ways, there’s been a lot of progress.”

Kamaria Nelson, 17, Student, John Carroll Catholic High School, Birmingham, AL

“I feel a lot of people are stricken by hopelessness. They don’t seem to be able to see through the situation to a future. One of my neighbors, who has been living here forever, said they are packing up and leaving because it’s over, there’s nothing here. But I think Detroit is going to come back. I will stay here in Detroit because I love Detroit.”

Dawn Taylor, 28, writer and poet, Detroit, MI

“One of the biggest differences is that in the ‘60s, there were no blacks in management positions at white-owned media. Today, we do have blacks that have reached various levels of senior management. But, looking behind me, there are not a lot of people to bring along, to move up the ranks.”

Sandra Long, Journalist, Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia, PA

“The more personal the interaction becomes the less willing white folks are to actually do things or support actions that would change relations between the races. Which suggests that there is still a substantial amount of prejudice, and a disconnect between what we believe in principle and what we’re willing to do in practice.”

Camille Z. Charles, Associate Professor, of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania