

A Ten-Point Plan

by Peter Dreier

The Advisory Board should not wait for direction from the President. Nor should it even direct its recommendations exclusively to the President. Rather it should view its audience as the general public. Of course we'd like our leaders to set the tone and the climate for change, but we shouldn't expect our Presidents or

Congress to initiate the important changes needed to improve race relations in America. As Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ida Wells, A. Philip Randolph, Walter Reuther, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez and others recognized, improvements in race relations come about when citizens are organized and in motion.

10 • Poverty & Race • Vol. 6, No. 6 • November/December 1997

demanding justice, not begging for it, forcing government leaders to respond to pressure from below.

What we don't need from the Advisory Board is a sermon (or a 500-page report) calling for greater understanding, "dialogue" or small pilot programs. Nor do we need another massive study of America's racial situation, such as Myradal's *American Dilemma* or the Kerner Commission report.

We don't need a full employment program for sociologists either. Rather, we need a full employment program for America's workers. If there is one truism about race relations, it is that prejudice, bigotry and discrimination decline when everyone who wants to work has a job at decent wages. Although it is simplistic to argue that if you give people a job, hearts and minds will follow, it is certainly true that full employment at decent wages makes interracial cooperation much more likely. Otherwise, competition over a shrinking pie (or the crumbs from the economy's table) will lead to resentments, bitterness and racial tensions. Studies showed that the number of lynchings went up whenever the Southern cotton economy declined. In more recent times, economic hard times are correlated with increases in the murder rate, racial violence and hate crimes.

At a time when the nation's economic prosperity is primarily benefitting the wealthiest 20%, we need the Advisory Board to remind us that economic justice is a precondition for racial justice. The Advisory Board should recommend a broad policy agenda that will help unite those Americans on the bottom three-quarters of the economic ladder around a

common vision of the American Dream -- and a road map explaining how to get there.

Here are 10 ideas for the Advisory Board to consider as its recommendations to President Clinton, Congress and the American people:

1. Require the Federal Reserve to change the definition of "full employment" from 6% unemployed to 2% unemployed, so that it will no longer boost interest rates whenever working people are doing well, in order to stem Wall Street's misguided fears of inflation.

2. Reform our federal tax structure to return to a more progressive system, especially by raising tax rates on large corporations and very wealthy individuals, so that we have the funds necessary to invest in our nation's future.

3. Invest in a major public works program, similar to the New Deal WPA, to rebuild our nation's crumbling infrastructure of roads, sewers, water systems, bridges, public schools, playgrounds and parks, which would generate millions of jobs in both the public and private sectors.

4. Enact a universal health insurance program and regulate the cost of medical care, so that our nation's children, in particular, will not needlessly go without preventative medical care.

5. Update the nation's labor laws to level the playing field between employees and employers and give America's working people a fair voice in their workplace lives, to replace the current system biased in favor of management.

6. Replace the current campaign finance system of legalized bribery with a system of public financing, to reduce the influence of big money in

American politics -- ultimately by appointing Supreme Court justices who will vote to overturn the infamous *Buckley v. Valeo* decision that gives wealthy people an unfair advantage in exercising free speech.

7. At a minimum, equalize the funds we spend (per student) on public education between poor and wealthy school districts. Reform our current over-reliance on local property taxes to fund local schools, a system guaranteeing that poor children will receive a poorer education than their wealthier neighbors.

8. Cash in the "peace dividend" we've been expecting since the end of the Cold War by reducing the nation's economic dependence on military spending and putting the money to work solving our nation's economic problems. We need a 10-year plan to convert our nation's scientific and technological over-reliance on the military to civilian uses so that the nation's defense contractors, defense workers (including both civilians and soldiers, who are disproportionately people of color) and communities that have long depended on the Pentagon are not the victims of the Cold War's end.

9. Increase the minimum wage to at least the official poverty level, so that families who work hard will be able to support their children.

10. Bring America's family policies -- maternity/paternity leaves, vacation time, child care -- up to the level of our Canadian and European counterparts.

Peter Dreier directs the Public Policy Program at Occidental College. □