50 years ago, a presidential commission called out America's 'white racism.' It didn't go over well.

Three books look back on the landmark Kerner Report:

"Separate and Unequal" by Steven M. Gillon, "Healing Our Divided Society" by Fred Harris and Alan Curtis (eds.) and "The Kerner Report," with an introduction by Julian E. Zelizer by Carlos Lozada March 2 Email the author

THE KERNER REPORT: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders

Princeton University Press. 498 pp. $35

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism

By Steven M. Gillon. Basic Books. 374 pp. $32

HEALING OUR DIVIDED SOCIETY: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report

By Fred Harris and Alan Curtis (eds.). Temple University Press. 469 pp. $24.95

Presidential commissions are the most malleable of Washington tools. They are deployed after searing national traumas,

such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the 9/11 attacks. They tackle specific economic concerns, such as smallbusiness

development or the future of the aerospace sector. And sometimes they are even meant to counter nonexistent

threats, such as President Trump's short-lived Advisory Commission on Election Integrity.

When you're not sure what to do but really want to seem like you're doing something, announce a commission. You'll

usually get decent press, a fancy report and time enough for the public to move on.

That is what President Lyndon Johnson had in mind when he created the Kerner Commission to examine the riots that

exploded across the country, from Watts to Newark to Detroit, in the late 1960s. Johnson hoped the panel would affirm his

Great Society programs and civil rights leadership. Instead, a commission led and staffed by

conventional, establishment

figures leveled an unexpectedly dire warning in its best-selling March 1968 report: "Our Nation is moving toward two

societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." The 11-member panel blamed white racism and called for

massive new government spending and reforms to redress the conditions afflicting black communities. The commission

may not be especially well-remembered — save among aging, nostalgic liberals — but it should be, with controversial and

consequential findings that resonate 50 years later.

"The Kerner Report represented the last gasp of 1960s liberalism — the last full-throated declaration that the federal

government should play a leading role in solving deeply embedded problems such as racism and poverty," historian

Steven M. Gillon writes in "Separate and Unequal," his compelling new history of the commission. The panel, formally

named the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, also embodied the eternal contradictions and trade-offs

between lofty goals and limited resources, between a problem's diagnosis and the prospects for its cure. The Kerner

Commission was right about race in America, but its very ambitions enabled the backlash against much of what it hoped to

achieve.

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"What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?" That is the

mandate Johnson gave the members of his new commission in a Saturday morning White House meeting on July 29, 1967,

less than a week after race riots left dozens dead and hundreds of buildings burned to the ground in Detroit. "Let your

search be free," he urged. "As best you can, find the truth and express it in your report."

Except that wasn't really what he wanted. The commission included Republicans, Democrats, labor leaders, business

execs, law enforcement officials and members of Congress, but Johnson made sure to appoint loyalists such as Illinois

Gov. Otto Kerner as chairman and lawyer David Ginsburg as executive director. The president expected them to assure the

public that he was doing right by black America, yet also reassure white Americans that the problems in the country's cities

were not so scary. When Johnson later admonished Sen. Fred Harris, the commission's youngest member, not to forget

that he was a faithful LBJ man, the president added, "If you do, Fred, I'll take out my pocketknife and cut your peter off."

But the commission soon split into factions, more over substance than political allegiances. Harris and Vice Chairman John

Lindsay, the charismatic New York mayor, argued strongly that racial discrimination and lack of jobs and opportunity for

African Americans were key forces behind the riots, whereas businessman Charles "Tex" Thornton wanted the commission

to state that the riots were caused by disrespect for law. "He feared that linking the riots to poverty gave people permission

to loot and destroy property," Gillon writes.

[The racism of good intentions: review of 'Stamped from the Beginning' by Ibram X. Kendi]

The commission dispatched teams of investigators to several cities that had endured rioting, and they returned with

detailed reports featuring interviews with residents and officials, as well as statistics from local agencies and census data.

“The evidence they gathered of persistent racial discrimination, and a growing gap between blacks and whites, was both

overwhelming and irrefutable,” Gillon writes. They charted the disparities between urban black schools and suburban

white ones, the daily discrimination in access to housing and employment, and the prevalence of police misconduct

against black communities. The investigators tasked with studying the Detroit riots said that police there “often performed

with no greater professionalism than one might expect from a huge armed force of white civilian extremists.”

Those field teams were packed with young idealists — including returning volunteers from some early Peace Corps cohorts

— who doubted that Johnson’s Great Society efforts went far enough. Soon, senior commission staffers became convinced

that conditions in black neighborhoods were so bad, and white power structures so indifferent, that there was a “rational

dimension” to the riots. And after hearing testimony in Washington and visiting the affected cities, even skeptical

commissioners started turning. “I’ll be a son-of-a-gun,” Thornton said, explaining that the experiences “brought me 99

miles further to the left than I thought I would be.”

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Ginsburg cobbled a consensus around the theme of “white racism” for the final report — “broad enough to gain the

support of Democrats and Republicans on the commission, yet elusive enough to avoid pointing fingers at specific

institutions” — but that left a more practical matter: How would the commission answer Johnson’s final question, on

preventing future outbreaks of violence?

Lindsay, who emerged as the commission's dominant player, argued that attacking white racism was insufficient; the

panel also had to address the poverty, substandard schools and inadequate housing in black neighborhoods that, in his

view, flowed from racism. "It's a plain example of national neglect," he told his colleagues. The commission ended up

calling for massive jobs programs, income supplements and major expansions of public housing, among many other

initiatives. Lindsay and Harris believed that the commission needed to "shock the public into confronting the legacy of race

in America and propose a more aggressive federal program to attack the roots of the unrest," Gillon writes.

But as the potential costs of such efforts reached the tens of billions of dollars, the commissioners who were members of

Congress expressed skepticism that anything like this could pass on Capitol Hill. And it wasn't clear that such ambition

was even the point. "How did we get into all these recommendations?" Thornton grumbled. "We're a riot commission."

Only Ginsburg's heroic efforts produced a unanimous report. Commissioners who barely knew one another trusted him to

iron out their differences. He also deflected criticisms by reading lengthy portions of the draft report aloud in commission

meetings, leaving less time for debate. (Slow clap.)

Officially published on March 1, 1968, the report became a sensation, selling nearly 1 million copies in two weeks. Even

today, the 2016 edition reissued by Princeton University Press is a riveting read. It doesn't just detail particular riots but

recounts key events preceding them. It features a meaty chapter on the history of America's racial conflicts since colonial

times. It describes the frustrated hopes of African Americans in the nation's cities. And its call to action is dramatic: "To

pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the

destruction of basic democratic values."

The commissioners had discussed whether the report should urge the administration to redirect funds away from the

Vietnam War and toward domestic spending, but they decided the notion would be too fraught. Instead they wrote vaguely

that the "great productivity of our economy" would finance reforms and asserted that America must "generate new will —

the will to tax ourselves to the extent necessary to meet the vital needs of the Nation."

The commission had identified vast social problems, and it decided that vast governmental solutions were the appropriate

response. It is not an uncommon impulse, then or now, but it undermined the commission's cause. "In their well-intended

desire to provide a clear road map for change," Gillon writes, "the commission overestimated both the public's appetite for

reform and the administration's ability to achieve it."

The Kerner Report generated substantial news coverage — the "white racism" charge was irresistible for headline writers

— yet the president who launched it barely acknowledged it. Johnson was furious that the report neglected to praise his

record, and he refused to publicly thank the commissioners. "He could not understand how the commission could think it

was a good idea to recommend billions of dollars in additional social spending at a time when Congress would not fund

existing Great Society programs," Gillon explains. Good thing there was no pocketknife handy.

The commission's conclusions also strengthened the emerging conservative backlash against Johnson's Great Society.

Richard Nixon seized on the report for his law-and-order campaign in 1968. "The major weakness of the presidential

commission is that it, in effect, blames everybody for the riots except the perpetrators of the riots," he told a radio show

days after the report was published. Weeks later, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, and the violence

that followed effectively ended the debate over the commission, Gillon writes. White Americans became even less willing to

countenance appeals for racial justice or endorse massive new federal spending for cities.

"The report overestimated the will of white suburban voters to support programs that benefitted urban blacks at the same

time that it underestimated their fear of racial unrest," Gillon concludes. "In so doing, it further alienated a key group of

voters whose power would only grow in the decades that followed. The Democratic Party would spend the next five

decades trying to lure them back."

And, if the 2016 election is any indication, it is still trying.

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Many of the commission's findings are relevant today — "hauntingly relevant," historian Julian Zelizer writes in his

introduction to the 2016 edition. No surprise, then, that Harris, the last surviving member of the commission, has co-edited

a book of essays attempting to update the original report for its 50th anniversary.

"Healing Our Divided Society" includes worthy contributions from economists, criminologists, educators, journalists,

nonprofit leaders and pollsters. It concludes that, despite areas of significant progress, conditions

for many black

Americans remain dire. Schools have resegregated. The wealth gap between white and black America, already substantial,

widened severely after the Great Recession. And mass incarceration is a way of life. "Prison has become an economic

development policy for rural whites and a housing policy for urban minorities," it states in a typically damning passage. "A

racially biased prison-industrial complex has been created."

[The radical chic of Ta-Nehisi Coates]

Yet, if the concerns recur, so do the blind spots. The ambition is vast — major job creation programs, tax credits, minimumwage

increases, single-payer health care and much more — but implementation is again hazy. The book's shortest

chapter, less than two full pages, is devoted to financing these reforms: Tax increases for wealthier Americans. Taxes on

financial transactions. Elimination of tax loopholes. Higher estate taxes.

Like the original Kerner Report, "Healing Our Divided Society" calls for new political will to change course, and those

specifics are even more amorphous. "We will need to tap into the infinite love that lies below the surface in our nation,"

writes contributor Dorothy Stoneman, founder of YouthBuild USA, "listen to the hearts and minds of young leaders who

have suffered from poverty and have a better vision, and build a dynamic movement that is a magnet to the best in all of us

and together build a nation that is more wise, loving, respectful."

Reformers must emphasize values and not just programs, the book declares, even if all its contributors offer their own pet

policy ideas. "We know what works," it affirms on more than one occasion, with a confidence

that should inspire

skepticism. “Now, we must build the will to do it.”

I wish a couple of Tex Thorntons — and definitely a David Ginsburg — had been thrown into the mix.

Some of the contributors do acknowledge the challenges of funding and approval — “I recognize that our politics will have

to change for the full policy agenda I discuss to be enacted,” economist Jared Bernstein writes — while others look back on

the lessons of the original effort. “The Kerner Commission reached the right conclusion at an inconvenient time,”

Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne contends. “The prospects of financing the massive project of social reconstruction

the commission called for were negligible.”

There are political moments when the nation needs prophecy more than policy, others when it requires wonks more than

sages. The marvel and the tragedy of the Kerner Commission is that it attempted to do, and be, both.