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Introduction and the History of the Kerner Report

AMERICA'S SUMMER OF 1967 was, indeed, a ferociously long, hot summer. Riots, looting, and burning devastated the black sections of many of America's cities. Police and the National Guard—virtually all white, mostly poorly trained, and tragically overreacting and deadly—struggled to contain the violence in the urban neighborhoods where it began, but for a frighteningly long time, they were unable to do so.

The worst disorders occurred in Newark and Detroit. These were not finally quelled until, in each city, President Lyndon Johnson finally sent in U.S. Army soldiers to replace state National Guard troops. By the time order was restored in Newark, twenty-six people had been killed there—twenty-one of them civilians, including six women and several children, all African Americans.[1] A total of 1,324 persons were charged with crimes growing out of the Newark riot. There were whole blocks of burned-out ruins, and estimates of property damage ran into the multiple millions.

By the end of the disorders in Detroit, thirty-three African Americans and ten whites had been killed, seventeen of whom—fifteen African Americans and two white men—were looters. Two of the Detroit deaths resulted from a fallen power line. Seventeen people were shot by accident or were murdered. One police officer was accidentally killed during a scuffle with a looter by a shot from a gun held by another officer. One white man was killed by a looter. Two hundred seventy-nine persons were injured, including eighty-five police officers. Property damage was horrendous—682 buildings burned, 412 of them completely destroyed—and 7,231 persons were arrested.

But that was only part of what happened during that summer. Major riots—with numbers of deaths, injuries, and arrests and great property

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damage—also occurred during that time in Plainfield, New Jersey; Atlanta; Buffalo; Cambridge, Maryland; Cincinnati; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Milwaukee; Minneapolis; and Tampa. Twenty-eight more cities had serious disorders, lasting one or two days, and ninety-two cities had smaller outbreaks of violence that lasted a day or less.

All this terrible disorder caused enormous shock, fear, alarm, outrage, bewilderment, and anxiety throughout the country. Reacting to this and to restore calm, a solemn President Lyndon Johnson went on national television on the evening of July 27, 1967, in an address to the nation, and announced, partly at the suggestion of Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma, the appointment of a blue-ribbon citizens commission, the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (soon to be called the Kerner Commission, after its chairman, Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois), the purpose of which was not only to investigate and report concerning the riots from a law-and-order standpoint but also to deal with basic causes, the president declaring, "The only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack—mounted at every level—upon the conditions that breed despair and violence. All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs. We should attack those problems—not because we are fired by conscience. We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America."[2]

The eleven members appointed to the commission by the president were a kind of two-by-two Noah's ark of diversity: a Democrat, Kerner, as chairman, and a Republican, New York City mayor John Lindsay as vice chair; two U.S. senators as members, a Democrat, Fred Harris of Oklahoma, and a Republican, Edward Brooke of Massachusetts; two House representatives, a Democrat, James Corman of California, and a Republican, William McCulloch of Ohio; two African American leaders, Senator Brooke and Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP; two public officials, Herbert Jenkins, Atlanta chief of police, and Katherine Peden, Kentucky secretary of state; and, finally, a labor leader, I. W. Abel, president of the United Steelworkers of America, and a business leader, Charles Thornton, chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Litton Industries. (A few years later, of course, there surely would have been a stronger level of gender and racial diversity in the appointments.)

A couple of progressive white leaders, as well as certain young African American activists, criticized the appointments as being a middle-of-the-road and bland group whose findings and recommendations would never amount to much. (Later, when the commission's report, dated March 1, 1968, was issued, these early critics seemed to be as surprised and pleased to have been wrong as President Johnson seemed as surprised and *dis*-pleased that they had not been right.)

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The mood was unusually somber in the Cabinet Room in the White House, where President Johnson had urgently called together, by telegram, the members of the new commission for the first time—on a Saturday morning, July 29, 1968. Underscoring the seriousness and importance of the task that was to be undertaken, there were also present at the meeting Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Attorney General Ramsey Clark, Budget Director Charles Schultze, Cyrus Vance, whom the president had earlier named as a special consultant to supervise federal riot-control efforts in Newark and Detroit, and several senior White House staff members.

After calling the meeting to order and making brief opening remarks, President Johnson introduced Cyrus Vance to report on the still-continuing Detroit disorders. Then, the president read aloud his executive order creating the commission and charging it to answer three basic questions about the riots: What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?

That same day, commission members alone met briefly again, and in that short session and in two later, longer organizational meetings with its new, presidentially appointed executive director, David Ginsberg, a caring, sensitive, distinguished Washington attorney with a background of government service, the Kerner Commission began its work.[3] A large staff was hired. Contracts were entered into for studies by academic and other experts.

The commission then commenced twenty days, from August to December 1967, of formal Washington hearings, held in the Treaty Room of the Executive Office Building, adjacent to the White House, and involving 130 witnesses ranging from civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover.

Staff members and consultants conducted field surveys for the commission in twenty-three cities, including more than twelve hundred interviews, attitude or opinion surveys, and other serious studies of conditions and causes. Commission members divided up into teams for site visits to eight riot cities and personally observed there, close up, the human cost of wretched poverty and harsh racism. (One of these teams, made up of Senator Fred Harris, today the only living member of the Kerner Commission, and Mayor John Lindsay, walked the streets of Cincinnati and Milwaukee, spontaneously engaging there with groups of teenage and young-adult black men, typical of the rioters, whose uniform cry was always something like "Jobs, man; get us a job, baby!")[4]

THE REPORT

Returning to Washington, sobered and moved, commission members met, in room S. 211 on the Senate side of the Capitol, for forty-four days—

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from December 1967 until near the end of February 1968—to actually write the Kerner Report, every paragraph of which was read aloud, then discussed and revised, before being approved by majority vote of commission members. If there was division on the harder questions, sometimes decisions would turn on a vote of six to five.

In these deliberations, the commission concentrated on the three questions the president had asked them to answer, having first decided, early on, to answer each question in order before moving on to the next one:

What Happened?

The commission was convinced that the riots had not been the result of a conspiracy, as President Johnson and some others believed—and they decided to say so, straight out: "The Urban Disorders of the summer of 1967 were not caused by, nor were they the consequence of, any organized plan or 'conspiracy.'"[5]

The commission detailed how, for two decades following World War II, roughly 1945 to 1965, African Americans began to migrate into the nation's cities, many being refugees from the desperate poverty and terrible degradation of the rural and small-town South. They came to places like Newark, Detroit, and Milwaukee looking for jobs—just when the better jobs were moving outside the city limits or to foreign countries or disappearing altogether because of automation. These new residents found northern-city segregation that was as rigid as in the southern states they had left. Three and four families might move into the rented rooms of what had once been an old single-family house, maybe turned away from already packed housing projects—as white flight began to rapidly turn the central city black. There were unresolved conflicts with nearly all-white police departments. Hostilities grew to the extent that almost any spark could set off an explosion.

The commission then truthfully laid out the facts in detail about the riots and about the way they had been handled, and mishandled, by the police and National Guard.

Why Did It Happen?

The commission condemned violence in strong terms: "Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice. The community cannot—it will not—tolerate coercion and mob rule. . . . Violence and destruction must be ended."[6]

The commission, after all its hearings and studies, could not say for sure why violence occurred in once place and not another—why there had been a riot in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965, for example, but

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not in 1967, or why no 1967 riots occurred in Washington, D.C., or Baltimore. But the commission could, and did, describe with particularity the conditions that existed in the places where riots had occurred, and they declared that those conditions and "white racism" were the root causes of the riots.[7]

The commission report's basic conclusion was that "our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."[8] "Segregation and poverty," the report continued, "have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. 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."[9]

What Can Be Done to Prevent It from Happening Again and Again?

When the commission arrived at this last question, it was clear to its members, including the more conservative ones, that the answers to the first two questions had already locked them into the answer to the third and final question: great and sustained national efforts were required, not only to combat 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 nonexistent housing.

The commission was honest in saying, "These programs will require unprecedented levels of funding."[10]

The report also made strong recommendations to improve the conduct of the media and the police, as well as the hostile, toxic police-community relations that existed throughout the country.

While the commission understood that just dealing with economic-class issues, without special attention to the problems of racism and discrimination (and today, we would add women's rights), would be fundamentally inadequate, the commission also knew that their recommended solutions would not apply only to black people or city people. Instead, the report declared, quite broadly, "It is time to make good the promises of American democracy to all citizens—urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian and every minority group."[11]

THE RELEASE OF THE REPORT

The commission met for the last time in a large ceremonial room, S. 201, on the Senate side of the Capitol Building. There was a last-minute

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flare-up around a discussion, led by a conservative member, about the possibility of minority reports by individual commissioners. But after this unsettling disruption was quickly squelched, the commission confirmed its earlier adoption of the report by unanimous vote, and all the commission members then affixed their signatures to the official federal document.

March 1, 1968, was set as the official date for the report's release, Members and staff shook hands all around, congratulated one another, and left, expecting to see each other soon at the White House, where they expected to formally deliver the report to President Johnson and ask him, as they had earlier agreed to do, for an additional six months of life for the commission, so that members and principal staff could lobby and advocate for the report's recommendations.

And they all knew that a great deal of lobbying and advocacy was going to be necessary. The commission had made a mistake in not opening its extensive hearings to the media and the public and in not working to foster media coverage of its field trips and riot-city visits. So no way had been provided for the media and the public to see the great racial problems and terrible living conditions that existed in the country in the same way and in the same depth as commission members had seen them. Members and staff of the commission had become worried that the long and expectedly sensational report—using the term "white racism" and calling for great new federal spending—would suddenly burst on the national consciousness with little context and with inadequate explanation and justification. So arrangements had already been made for the entire and lengthy report to be published in paperback by Bantam Books simultaneously with the March 1 release of the report's U.S. Printing Office version. (The Bantam Books edition proved to be a huge and sustained best seller, which bookstores could barely keep on the shelves as it was rushed through twenty-one separate printings.)

Careful arrangements were also made to get advance, embargoed copies of the report into the hands of reporters, columnists, television and radio commentators, and other selected writers in the fields of urban affairs, poverty, and race relations, so they would have the opportunity, with backgrounding by commission members and staff, to study the entire report and fully understand the bases for its findings and recommendations.

But it turned out that not enough of the right kind of early and late, complete backgrounding about the commission's work and report had been done with President Johnson himself. In fact, the president, it was learned, had been getting frequent, fragmentary, and often slanted backdoor reports from inside the commission, reports that made him increasingly apprehensive that the commission, particularly, as he was told, led by Senator Harris and Mayor Lindsay, was going "too far and too fast"—

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and the president had complained to commission members and others about this from time to time.[12]

Then, commission staff learned from White House staff that a congressman friend of President Johnson, who was acting on the word of a conservative member of the Kerner Commission, had told the president that the Kerner Report was going to be a "disaster" for him because it "condoned and encouraged riots" and had "not one good thing" to say about all the president had already done for civil rights and against poverty.[13]

This was totally untrue, but President Johnson believed it. He cancelled the formal meeting with the commission, rejected its report, and summarily discarded the congratulatory thank-you letters that had already been prepared for signature and mailing to the individual commission members—actions especially sad because, on the basis of false information, they came from a president who had achieved greater progress in the fight against racism and poverty than any of his predecessors or successors to date.

But there was more. Someone, most likely a White House staff member,[14] hoping to greatly lessen the report's impact, leaked a copy of the full Kerner Report to the *Washington Post*, whose editor called the commission's executive director, David Ginsberg, to tell him that the *Post* would run a front-page story about the report in its next-morning, February 29, issue—before sufficient planned backgrounding had been done with the media people who had been given embargoed copies of the report. The *Post* editor could not be dissuaded from this course, even after Ginsberg told him that if the newspaper would not relent, Ginsberg would himself immediately release the full report to all media at once—which Ginsberg then did. (This is the reason that, while the official date on the Kerner Report is March 1, 1968, the actual release date is recorded as February 29.)

Chaos reigned in the commission's office that evening, as swarms of reporters with thirty-minute deadlines frantically sought capsulizations of the six-hundred-plus-page report. Newspaper headlines the next morning were mostly something like "White Racism Cause of Black Riots, Commission Says." Many people never learned the rest of the story.

There was considerable backlash in the country. The comment of one white farmer—who viewed the report as saying that he, out of the goodness of his heart, should pay more taxes to help poor black people rioting in Detroit—was typical of many: "To hell with that! I've got enough troubles of my own. I'm barely making a living, and I'm already paying too much tax."[15] He and a lot of others were never to believe that the Kerner Commission was on their side, too, or fully understand the way so many of their fellow citizens had to live.

But a lot of leaders supported the Kerner Report—leaders like Vice President Hubert Humphrey; Senator Robert Kennedy of New York;

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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who called the report "a physician's warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life"[16]; Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner, who said, "We are in deep trouble as a people, and history will not deal kindly with any nation which will not tax itself to cure its miseries"[17]; and Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, who said, "The Kerner Report can be summarized in the words of that great American philosopher, Pogo, who said, 'We have met the enemy, and he is us!'"[18]

And despite the opposition, following the Kerner Report, America made progress on virtually every aspect of race and poverty for nearly ten years. Then, with burgeoning globalization, increasing automation, conservative political change, and eventually, unfriendly Supreme Court decisions, progress was slowed or stopped and, finally, reversed. With some improvement during each of the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama administrations, regression has been the trend since about the mid-1970s—and that is true today.

This is why we, Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, and the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, the private-sector follow-on and keeper of the flame for both the Kerner Commission and the Milton S. Eisenhower Violence Commission, have joined, as we have done before,[19] to organize and produce a fiftieth-anniversary *Kerner Report* update, the most important of all, with the hope that the issues of racism and poverty, income inequality, jobs, wages, education, housing, health, women's and children's rights, and police-community relations can be put back on the public agenda and that a broad coalition—urban and rural, men and women, white, black, Hispanic,[20] and other—can be mobilized for action on their common problems, because everybody does better when everybody does better.

This is not another study. It is a call to action. We know what works. Now, we must build the will to do it.