Memorandum

To: Rev. Kelly Kirby  
From: Judith D. Fischer  
Date: August 7, 2020  
Re: Summary of The Kerner Commission Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders

This summary covers three topics: 1) background on the writing of the Kerner Report, 2) a summary of the report, and 3) a summary of the aftermath of the report.

1. Background

Extensive civil unrest in American cities in 1967 led President Lyndon Johnson to commission the Kerner Report. On July 29 of that year, he established a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, stating, “The civil peace has been shattered in a number of cities. Americans are deeply disturbed.” Naming former Illinois Governor Otto Kerner as chair and appointing respected and somewhat moderate commissioners, he asked them to investigate three broad points:

“What happened?  
Why did it happen?  
What can be done to prevent it from happening again?”

Johnson’s Remarks on forming the commission fleshed out these points with additional detail.

Julian E. Zelizer, a professor of political history at Princeton, wrote an informative Introduction to the 2016 edition that explains how the report was produced. The commissioners hired a staff and various research organizations. They conducted closed hearings where they heard from witnesses, including local government figures, activists, governors, and scholars. They also traveled to affected cities. Proponents of various conflicting opinions jockeyed for prominence in the report. One point of view was that the violence had been caused by institutional racism, while a competing view was that social breakdown had caused the unrest, making stronger policing necessary.

Zelizer said the final report characterized the “riots as the outgrowth of racial inequality and oppression rather than as acts of political or criminal agitation.” This conclusion leaned more toward the liberals’ position, but stopped short of characterizing the riots as “an act of social revolution.” The report also said that the problem of violence would not be solved by providing police with tanks and more sophisticated weapons.
2. Summary of the Report

The report’s frequently quoted conclusion was that “Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white--separate and unequal.” (Report Summary at 1.) The commission elaborated, “Segregation and poverty 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.” (Report Summary at 2.)

The body of the report covered the following topics.

I. What happened?

Chapter 1, Profiles of Disorder, reported details about civil unrest in the 1960s and specific incidents of violence in the summer of 1967.
Chapter 2, Patterns of Disorder, concluded that there was no “typical” riot.
Chapter 3, Organized Activity, concluded that the riots were not caused by any organized plan or conspiracy.

II. Why Did It Happen

Chapter 4, The Basic Causes, stated that “white racism,” including a double standard applied by police, “is essentially responsible” for the unrest.
Chapter 5, Rejection and Protest, looked at the history of Blacks’ mistreatment in America.
Chapter 6, The Formation of Racial Ghettos, covered the movement of Blacks from the rural South to cities in the North and West. There, Blacks were excluded from white residential neighborhoods.
Chapter 7, Unemployment, Family Structure, and Social Disorganization, reported that 16 to 20% of Blacks in central cities were living “in squalor and deprivation in ghetto neighborhoods.” Blacks were likely to be employed, if at all, in low-paying jobs. This led to family breakup and “prostitution, dope addiction, and crime,” motivating children toward civil unrest.
Chapter 8, Conditions of Life in the Racial Ghetto, reported poor health and sanitation conditions as well as exploitation by merchants in the inner city.
Chapter 9, Comparing the Immigrant and Negro Experiences, noted that being Black restricted persons visibly, which was not the case with European immigrants. Partly for that

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1 The phrase “separate and equal” traces back to the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1897) case, where the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation of public facilities. In 1954, the Court rejected that doctrine in *Brown v Board of Education*. 
reason, although Blacks worked hard, they were denied access to good jobs and were thus unable to support their families.
II. What Can Be Done?

Chapter 10, The Community Response, recommended several measures for communities, including developing neighborhood task forces and bringing local governments closer to the people.

Chapter 11, Police and the Community, recommended, among other things, that police action in the ghetto be reviewed, that there be mechanisms for redress of grievances against the police, and that police departments recruit more Black officers.

Chapter 12, Control of Disorder, recognized the importance of maintaining civil order. To achieve that, among the recommendations were special training of police and creating methods of neutralizing rumors. But the commission also recognized the danger of indiscriminate and excessive police force and condemned police use of “mass destruction weapons, such as automatic rifles, machine guns and tanks.”

Chapter 13, The Administration of Justice under Emergency Conditions, recommended court reform and effective leadership by the bench and bar.

Chapter 14: Damages: Repair and Compensation, recommended that federal emergency measures, including provision of food and medical assistance, be available not only for natural disasters, but also for cities that experienced civil unrest.

Chapter 15, The News Media and the Disorders, reported that, despite some exceptions, the media generally covered the violence in a factual manner. However, some news reports exaggerated the degree of destruction. Furthermore, some media did not adequately convey to their mostly white audiences “a sense of the degradation, misery, and hopelessness of life in the ghetto.” To address this, the commission called for, among other things, employment of more Blacks in the media and greater coverage of the Black community.

Chapter 16, The Future of the Cities, presented three choices:
1. Maintain existing policies.
2. Attempt to “enrich” the ghetto whole abandoning integration as a goal.
3. Combine “enrichment” with policies encouraging Blacks to move out of the central city.

The commission recommended that the country adopt the third alternative.

Chapter 17, Recommendations for National Action, contained lengthy proposals in the following areas.

Employment. Mindful that young Blacks had difficulty finding good jobs, the commission proposed that the federal government create new jobs and provide job training.

Education. Noting that many schools, especially in the ghetto, had failed to provide quality educational experiences, the commission recommended, among other measures, increasing efforts to eliminate de facto segregation, providing quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children, and increasing parental involvement in the schools.

The Welfare System. The commissioners noted that antipoverty programs were not achieving their goals: the current welfare system was “designed to save money instead of people.” Welfare programs excluded many people in need and provided assistance “well below
the minimum necessary.” A better plan would be an income maintenance program that would at least bring incomes up to the poverty level.

**Housing.** To address housing problems, the commission recommended providing adequate affordable housing and combatting the discrimination that was a barrier to Blacks finding good housing. The private sector should be involved in these goals.

**Conclusion**

In its conclusion, commission cited witness Kenneth B. Clark, whose research had been used in the *Brown v. Board* case. Clark poignantly observed that the reports of the 1919 Chicago riot, the Harlem riot of 1935, the Harlem riot of 1943, and the McCone Commission seemed like the same movie—“same analysis, same recommendations, and the same inaction,” which left him feeling that he was watching the same picture over and over.

The report concluded, “It is time now to end the destruction and the violence, not only in the streets of the ghetto but in the lives of people.”

**III. Aftermath of the Report**

The *Kerner Report* was an instant best-seller. However, its conclusions were not universally accepted by the public; only 58% of Blacks 53% of whites agreed with its finding that racism caused the riots.

Martin Luther King Jr. called the *Kerner Report* a “physician's warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life.” But President Johnson was disappointed that it failed to include praise for his Great Society programs. Moreover, implementing the report would require tax increases, and Johnson, planning to run for a second term in November, didn’t want to risk the unpopularity that a tax increase could cause. He decided to simply ignore the report.

Johnson decided not to run in November, and Richard Nixon won the presidency on a “law and order” platform. Julian Zelizer noted, “Nixon’s law-and-order arguments won the day.” A 2020 New York Times article noted the similarity of 1967’s problems to today’s: “the Kerner panel’s list of troubles endured disproportionately by African-Americans could just as readily be compiled today — a shortage of jobs and adequate education, a persistence of discrimination and harsh police tactics. Police violence against people of color, the commission said, incited the riots more than any other factor. That, too, sounds familiar.”

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