

Fifty years since the Kerner Commission report

The urban riots of the 1960s and the remaking of American racial ideology

By Tom Mackaman
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Fifty years ago this week, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders issued its report on the wave of “race riots” that had swept the United States beginning in the early 1960s. Established by President Johnson in the midst of the massive Detroit riot of 1967, the Kerner Commission, as it was called after its chairman, Illinois Democratic Governor Otto Kerner, was assigned the task of uncovering the causes of the riots and proposing remedies.

The resulting 426-page report, released on February 29, 1968, portrayed devastating conditions in the cities. It found that the riots were not the outcome of “outside agitators” as Johnson had speculated. They instead arose from a lack of good jobs, overcrowded neighborhoods, substandard housing, poor educational opportunities, and especially police harassment and violence, which had very often provided the trigger for riots.

What is most immediately striking about the Kerner Commission report, from the vantage point of 2018, is its seriousness. Here was a commission, selected by the president and comprised of leading political figures, along with representatives from the corporate world, the trade unions, and civil rights organizations, grappling with a major social problem and producing a report that, whatever its intentions, amounted to an indictment of the existing order. The 600-page paperback version of the study was purchased in its first year by some 2 million Americans. Nothing like this could happen today.

It is also notable that the many retrospectives marking the anniversary that have appeared in recent days pass over in silence the far-reaching social reforms the commission proposed to meet “the urban crisis.” The report called for social spending “on a scale equal to the dimensions of the problems,” including the immediate creation of 2 million new jobs, 1 million of which would be funded by direct government spending; the readying within five years of 6 million affordable housing units; expanding the welfare system by raising benefits and making more people eligible; the implementation of a “guaranteed minimum income” for all Americans; and funding for city schools that would produce “equality of results” with wealthier school districts.

To read these parts of the Kerner report is to be reminded of an epoch of American political history so alien to contemporary official politics that it seems to belong to another planet. There has not been a single significant social or political reform in the United States since the 1960s, when, under the impact of the Civil Rights movement, the Johnson administration and Congress put in place Medicare and Medicaid, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act in little more than two years.

At the same time, in a series of decisions, the US Supreme Court dismantled the legal structures of Jim Crow segregation, and issued a series of landmark decisions on “one man, one vote” in state elections,

against mandatory prayer in schools, imposing certain restrictions on police repression (the *Miranda* rule), and guaranteeing access to adequate counsel in criminal trials (*Gideon v. Wainwright*).

That period was in fact drawing to a sudden and dramatic close even as the Kerner Commission was deliberating. None of its social reform proposals ever left the drawing board. There would be no massive programs for jobs, housing, and schools in the cities. Johnson’s promise of “guns and butter”—that he could offer social reforms and still wage the bloody imperialist war in Vietnam—was ending in catastrophic failure, with mounting pressure on the dollar reaching crisis levels by 1968. Both the Democratic administration and its Republican opponents in Congress rejected the Kerner spending recommendations. There would be guns, yes, but no more butter.

That is all forgotten. Instead, what is remembered about the Kerner report is its key racial assertions, made in the report summary. These are, still today, holy gospel for American liberals and pseudo-left radicals.

First, the commission drew the famous conclusion that the US “is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” Second, it held that “white racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities.” And finally, the report stated that “white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” In other words, the commissioners concluded that whites in general, whatever their social class and wherever they lived, were implicated in the conditions that gave rise to the many “civil disorders” studied in the report.

Racial discrimination was a powerful and malignant factor in American society, in both the South and the North. But the Commission’s conclusion that “white society” as a whole was responsible obscured the role of actually existing social forces, beginning with the Democratic Party, which had been the enforcer of segregation in the both the South and, operating through the city “machines,” in the North as well, since the decades before the Civil War.

The Kerner Commission summary claimed that the “frustrations of powerlessness have led [to] alienation and hostility toward the institutions of laws and government *and the white society that controls them.*” Though vague, the first half of this statement is true enough: the commissioners meant that urban youth were angry at the law-and-order agencies of the state—the cops, courts, jails, etc. However, the repressive apparatus of the state was not controlled by “white society,” but by the politicians and civil servants of the capitalist class. Likewise, the banks and mortgage lenders that imposed “redlining”—the imposition of a *de facto* segregation on African American neighborhoods—were capitalist

enterprises.

In sum, the label “white racism” was used to whitewash the predatory and violent workings of the profit system in the cities and absolve American capitalism of its crimes—including the Vietnam War, which was not mentioned by the Kerner report summary, even though it drew so many soldiers, both white and black, from the cities.

What is most fascinating about the report’s assertions about “white racism” and “white institutions” is that they come only in the summary, and nowhere else in the massive report, which remains an empirically valuable illustration of a world in which young African Americans, along with urban youth of other races, could not find adequate jobs, training, education, and housing, while enduring immense police repression. The racial conclusion was not drawn from the data, but imposed upon it.

The Kerner Commission could not acknowledge that these issues were rooted in the gathering crisis of the entire postwar global order, whose signs were becoming manifest in the 1960s. The urban riots of the mid-1960s that prompted the formation of the Kerner Commission—including Philadelphia and Rochester in 1964; Watts in 1965; Cleveland and Chicago in 1966; and culminating in the massive 1967 upheavals in Newark and Detroit—turned out to be harbingers of a revolutionary crisis that rocked the world capitalist system until the mid-1970s.

The American cities, especially its great industrial centers, were among the first to feel the crisis. By the early 1960s, corporate executives, acting with the complicity of the trade unions, responded to falling profit rates in basic industry—steel, auto, meatpacking, textiles, machinery, etc.—by shifting production away from the high-wages areas of the cities to rural and suburban areas, and by funneling profits away from industrial investment into financial speculation, a process encouraged by successive corporate and high-income tax cuts by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and by the artificially strong dollar, which was still the bulwark of the international exchange system, convertible to gold at the rate of \$35 per ounce.

The lid came off in 1968. Even as the Kerner Commission released its report, the Tet Offensive was underway in Vietnam, shattering the Johnson administration’s claims that the war would soon end in victory. On March 12, two weeks after publication of the report, the president, who had four years earlier won the most-lopsided election in recent history, very nearly lost the New Hampshire Democratic primary to Senator Eugene McCarthy, who called for an end to the Vietnam War. Three days later, on March 15, a sudden run on the US dollar caused Johnson to order the British government to shut down the London gold market. On March 16, Robert Kennedy entered the race for the Democratic presidential nomination against Johnson—that same day American soldiers murdered some 500 civilians at the village of My Lai in Vietnam. On March 31, Johnson announced he would not seek re-election.

On April 4, 1968, just over one month after the Kerner report was released, Martin Luther King, Jr., who was being harassed by the FBI, was shot dead in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone in support of a strike of sanitation workers. Immediately afterwards riots erupted in over 100 cities. Scores of people were killed and over 15,000 arrests were made. Property damage was counted in the billions of dollars. It was the most widespread civil unrest in American history outside of the Civil War.

More than just the long postwar boom was coming to an end in those explosive days. For more than a century previous, American industry had grown almost uninterrupted. Its factories, though brutally exploitative, had provided a seemingly endless supply of jobs for immigrants arriving first from the British Isles and Central Europe, and then East Asia, the Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe.

As late as 1910, some 90 percent of African Americans still lived in the

southern states, where they were overwhelmingly engaged in poorly paid agricultural work. But World War I, followed by the National Origins acts of 1922 and 1924—which were motivated by fears of “foreign” socialist influence—brought to an end mass European immigration. It was replaced by the Great Migration of poor blacks and whites out of the South.

Over the next half-century, the African American population went from being among the most rural and agricultural demographics, to being, arguably, the most urban and working class. In the cities new forms of organization and culture flourished, and with it a new militancy, influenced by socialism and the Russian Revolution.

It was in fact this great shift that prepared the way for the end of segregation. It is not accidental that the first powerful development of the Civil Rights movement took place in Alabama, whose steel milling and coal and iron mining region around Birmingham was the most industrialized part of the South. It had also been there, in Alabama, that the influence of the Russian Revolution had the greatest impact on black workers, many of whom were, a generation earlier in the 1920s and 1930s, attracted to the Communist Party.

In short, America was not becoming “two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” The racial barriers separating the working class, black from white, consciously created by the ruling class in previous generations to uphold racial slavery and then Jim Crow—and implemented in the main through the Democratic Party—were being battered down by powerful objective changes and the force of the Civil Rights movement, itself a mass movement of black workers supported by youth of all races. It preceded and fed into the working class strike wave of 1969-1974.

But the American ruling class was not yet ready to entirely give up on a tool that had been so useful for so long. It would be necessary to create new racial policies and a new racial ideology to impede the unification of the working class.

The policies eventually coalesced into what came to be known as “affirmative action,” or “black capitalism,” as Nixon preferred to call it—the deliberate promotion of a thin layer of African Americans recruited to the ruling elite. The ideology that emerged was identity politics—the concept that entire groups of people have common political interests that do not derive from their relationship to the means of production, but from their race, gender, or sexuality. The Kerner Commission report summary anticipated these trends and set the stage for their implementation.

If the Kerner Commission was correct, and the fundamental problem was “white institutions,” and not capitalism, then this could be mitigated by the promotion of a layer of the African American middle class into capitalist institutions, giving them a “stake in the system.” Accordingly, the Kerner Commission called for the hiring of more black police officers and journalists and encouraged the election of more black officials.

Similar proposals were emerging elsewhere. The same day that Johnson called for the formation of National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders—with Detroit still in flames and occupied by the US Army—top corporate executives, along with prominent African American leaders, met in Detroit and formed the New Detroit Committee. Heavily funded by the Ford Foundation, it sought to promote a new black leadership that would be loyal to capitalism.

In 1967, several African Americans became mayors of important cities: Carl Stokes in Cleveland; Walter Washington in Washington D.C.; and Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana. They were joined in 1973 by Coleman Young in Detroit, Ted Berry in Cincinnati, Maynard Jackson in Atlanta, and Tom Bradley as mayor of Los Angeles. Ever since, the cultivation of an African American elite has been a central thrust of liberal politics, culminating in the election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008. This has been executed to great success—for the Democratic Party and the new black elite, that is. But none of it has done anything to improve social conditions in America’s big cities, which, if anything, have sharply

deteriorated since the 1960s, in spite of the proliferation of black mayors and police chiefs.

Equally pernicious has been the new racial ideology signaled by the Kerner report's identification of "white racism" and "white society" as the culprit of the problems confronting black working class youth, and its silence on the workings of the profit system, the source of racial oppression. In the years since, "white racism" has become something of an answer machine, used in every possible instance to interpret social problems as being about race. So, for example, the question of police violence, which lay at the heart of the urban uprisings of the 1960s, is today presented by pro-Democratic Party groups like Black Lives Matter as simply a racial question. This requires overlooking the fact that the largest number of victims of police killings are white, and disregarding the connection between police violence and mounting socio-economic inequality.

America has indeed moved towards "two societies," as the Kerner Commission warned, but not "white" and "black," terms which are increasingly meaningless as racial intermarriage becomes commonplace and the fastest-growing segment of the population among young people is "inter-racial" or "other." The fundamental polarization is along class lines, not those of race, between the tiny super-rich elite and the vast mass of working people, between the class that owns and profits, and that class that works, produces all wealth, and yet increasingly lacks even basic necessities.

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