“Rumor Has It: Narratives of American Liberalism in the *Kerner Report*”

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On July 27, 1967, President Lyndon Baines Johnson delivered a televised speech about tumult in city streets. The speech was in part a retort to a statement by Michigan Governor George Romney, who had hopes of becoming the Republican party’s presidential candidate in1968 and running on a law-and-order platform. Romney had charged that “The nation is in crisis, and this [Johnson] Administration has failed even to make a proposal to protect our people on the streets and in their homes from riots and violence.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Johnson shot back, “There is no American right to loot stores, or to burn buildings, or to fire rifles from the rooftops. That is crime.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He added that he had no patience for commentators and activists who praised the disorder in the streets, “The apostles of violence, with their ugly drumbeat of hatred must know that they are heading for disaster.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Johnson made his remarks a fortnight after thousands of in residents Newark had for six days battled police, heaved rocks, overturned cars, burnt buildings, and looted stores. By the time the fracas ended, city police units and National Guardsmen had arrested over thirteen hundred people, had fired over thirteen thousand rounds of ammunition, had killed more than two dozen residents, and had wounded at least a thousand more.

The day before Johnson’s speech, another melee broke out in Detroit. It also lasted for six days and nights. More than forty people died; more than a thousand were wounded by gunfire; and at least thirteen hundred buildings were destroyed by arson.[[4]](#footnote-4) Later known by generations of Detroiters as the “Great Rebellion,” the series of street struggles halted all automobile production in the city for three days and, according to the political scientist Elizabeth Hinton, “disrupted the American economy to a far greater extent than any other incident of urban disorder in the 1960s.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The violent events in Newark and Detroit superficially resembled the burnings and looting that had been occurring in predominately African-American neighborhoods in US cities at least as far back as the summer of 1965. Accused of pampering morally deficient city dwellers thru his war on poverty, Johnson responded by authorizing the formation of a National Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (known within the Washington beltway as “the Crime Commission”). It submitted its final report in early January 1967. According to that document, rioters were not hardened criminals with rap sheets and prison backgrounds. They were for the most part black males between the ages of 15 and 25 who were residing in low-income households headed by a single, frequently unemployed parent (often a woman). The report recommended that hereon police surveil local “predeliquent” children living in poverty and one-parent households (sometimes labelled “dysfunctional families”). If the police observe the children being drawn toward minor acts of delinquency, the police should alert social workers and teachers, who will make special efforts to change the youths’ values and outlooks and to eliminate self-destructive convictions about their prospects in the United States. Such preventive educational measures, when combined with the improved training of police in the use of threats and weapons and with continued the implementation of various pieces of Johnson’s Great Society program, should bring the current cycle of urban violence to a close.

Johnson praised the Commission for what he and his aids called a “major work of scholarship.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He proceeded to implement some of the Commission’s ideas. One result was the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1968 (originally called the “Safe Streets and Homes Act”).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The events in Newark and Detroit differed, however, from the earlier outbreaks of lawlessness, and this troubled Johnson and his advisors. First of all, the duration and scale of the collective violence in both cities were longer and larger than had been typical of most earlier outbreaks of urban violence. Only the enormous 1965 burnings and lootings in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles were comparable. Second, the events in Newark and Detroit took place two years after the federal government had passed the Voting Rights Act, which protected the citizenship rights of African Americans, and also after the federal government had begun implementing many pieces of “Great Society” legislation that in theory should have increased the access of poorer Americans to affordable housing, pre-school education, job training, and other social services. Those government actions should have spread contentment among African Americans and led to greater social harmony. Yet, the magnitude of the destruction seemed larger than ever.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Johnson’s cabinet and advisors met repeatedly to discuss the puzzling events. Several said that the third successive summer of urban violence, when coupled with the recent growth in the number of campus-based mobilizations against the Vietnam War, was evidence that the social fabric of America was coming apart, that the country was becoming “unglued.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Some saw tale-tell signs of foreign and revolutionary conspiracies in the events. Some saw the violence as a result of the persistence of economic inequalities and white racism. Johnson went back and forth between conspiratorial and structural explanations.

 Outside the White House, conjectures about a black uprising ran rampant. According to the Associated Press, the turbulence in Detroit resembled a stampeding herd of animals; it was a “Negro rampage of burning and pillaging.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In a telegram message to Attorney General Ramsey Clark, Michigan Governor Romney warned that the street violence in Detroit could evolve in “an organized state of insurrection.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Opinion surveys, meanwhile, suggested that more than 70 percent of white Americans thought the riots were organized.[[12]](#footnote-12)

On July 29, 1967, Johnson authorized the formation of an 11-person National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. He appointed Otto Kerner, a former Governor of Illinois, to be chair. Politicians, pundits, and scholars soon dubbed the body the “Kerner Commission.” Johnson proclaimed before the press that he wanted the Commission to get to the bottom of the troubling events. He publicly implored the Commissioners not to look away from whatever the evidence revealed:

let your search be free. Let it be untrammeled by what has been called the “conventional wisdom.” As best you can, find the truth, the whole truth, and express it in your report.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Johnson wished the Commission to be truthful because he intended to use the Commission’s final report to help him respond to the rising tide of rioting. A better America through applied social science.

This paper looks at four sometimes overlooked features of the report: (1) its critique of journalistic accounts of the violence; (2) its stark distinction between hard-working, older, and non-violent blacks and wild, childish, and easily manipulated rioters; (3) its implicit rescue tale about how the modern US state can ameliorate the sufferings of blacks; and (4) its reassuring claims about the positive impact of US capitalism on Americans’ lives as producers and consumers. When linked together, these features produce a logically coherent narrative about political conflict in America that is conservative in its ideological implications. The narrative is romantic in its state-to-the-rescue plot line, comedic in its upbeat vision about capitalist development, and gothic in its anticipation—bordering on paranoia—of revolutionary subversion of the status quo.[[14]](#footnote-14) We will link these separate features through the notion of “rumor,” a term of derision that the authors of the *Kerner Report* used to convey the superiority of their tale over the views of journalists and the beliefs of local actors.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. E Pluribus Unum

Unlike the Crime Commission, the Kerner Commission was formed at a moment when Johnson was politically vulnerable. Conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats who opposed his Great Society agenda had gained power in Washington, thanks to the 1966 congressional elections. Many voters were angry with Johnson’s Great Society program. The 1965 Voting Rights Act had upset White Southerners, who were already agitated by the combative language and disruptive activities of local civil-rights activists and sympathizers. Meanwhile, the 1965 Fair Housing Act upset White voters in the North, Midwest, and West who believed that the federal rules about non-discrimination disrupted established ethnic communities and hurt the value of homes in urban working-class neighborhoods and middle-class suburbs. Whites everywhere felt that Johnson was giving Blacks more than their fair share of money and legal aid.

Outside the halls of government, civil rights and anti-war activists were becoming more disruptive in tactics and more militant in rhetoric. A few doused themselves with gasoline and then lit themselves on fire to protest the war in Vietnam. Young men began to refuse to register for the draft, and growing numbers were publicly burning their draft cards. By 1969, the government was attempting to prosecute more than 33,000 for refusing to be inducted into the military[[16]](#footnote-16). Nuns and priests attended peace rallies; celebrities, from poets to athletes, refused to attend events in the White House. Meanwhile, the civil-rights movement fissured as supporters disagreed over demands and tactics.[[17]](#footnote-17) A new generation of activists—such as Stokely Carmichael and H. “Rap” Brown—opposed working patiently through the political system. Conventional politics, allegedly, entailed countless compromises and continued postponement of change in the deplorable economic and social conditions of blacks. So, Carmichael and others called for community self-rule and black citizens’ control over black institutions, from businesses, tenements, and union organizations to schools, churches, and police outposts. For these advocates of “black power,” collective self-determination was the goal to be pursued, not government-led integration into a white suburban vision of material happiness and individual consumerism.

Johnson sensed that the window of opportunity to realize his own dream of a better America was closing quickly. He therefore appointed members to the Kerner Commission who were likely to reach conclusions in line with his own policy preferences. In the words of the historian Julian Zelizer, Johnson was “stacking the commission with established political figures who were moderate and committed to the existing economic and political system,” and “would ensure a final report that praised his Great Society programs.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Hinton likewise has contended that “Compared to the distinctly moderate leanings of the Crime Commission members and that body’s dearth of elected officials, Johnson stacked the Kerner Commission with liberal policymakers and civil rights activists.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Johnson chose seven federal and state elected officials, and four non-governmental leaders. Kerner was a long-standing Johnson loyalist with a “relatively strong reputation on racial issues,” who as governor commuted the death penalty of an African-American who reportedly had been tortured under police custody.[[20]](#footnote-20) Mayor John Lindsay of New York City, a possible future Republican candidate for the presidency, served as the Commission’s Vice-Chair. Lindsay, also, was a liberal on questions of social justice and well respected by mainstream, middle-class civil-rights activists. Edward Brooke, a newly elected Republican Senator from Massachusetts, was the only African-American politician who sat on the Commission. A decorated veteran of World War II, Brooke was not hesitant to discuss the humiliation he felt when serving in the country’s segregated Army; yet he also opposed the confrontational and anti-government rhetoric of Carmichael and others affiliated with the black-power movement. Oklahoma Senator Fred Harris was an outspoken liberal, known for his ardent support of government programs to improve the economic and social circumstances of non-white Americans. California Representative James Corman likewise supported government programs to help poorer non-whites, as did Katherine Peden, the Democratic Commissioner of Commerce for the state of Kentucky and only woman to serve on the Advisory Commission, and Ohio Representative William McCulloch, a Republican congressional leader who helped Johnson pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The four non-governmental officials on the Commission – I.W. Abel (President of United Steelworkers of America), Charles Thornton (Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Litton Industries, a Texan, and a friend of Johnson), Roy Wilkins (Executive Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and Herbert Jenkins (Chief of Police for Atlanta) – were politically safe picks for Johnson. They all were dedicated social reformers and ideologically in the mainstream of the country. No one on the committee was either a law-and-order conservative, a black-power activist, or even an outspoken critic of the current administration’s foreign policy.

The former *New York Times* journalist John Herbers has written that the composition of the Commission was relatively broad (“a cross-section of highly responsible government and business leaders”[[21]](#footnote-21)). This is partly true. The members belonged to different major political parties and came from different sectors of the economy and society. But Johnson had arranged the Commission’s membership to be limited, so that the conversation would be restricted to people of a particular political and social faith. Doubters about the efficacy and adaptability of the modern American state or about the benefits of modern capitalism were nowhere to be seen.

Consequently, the final report, which sold approximately one million copies,[[22]](#footnote-22) offered readers neither a debate nor a set of rival opinions and interpretations. It offered a consensus position about how best to expand the Great Society project and, in the process, quash further unrest. To this extent, the *Kerner Report* would be what Johnson wanted: a nonpartisan attempt “to guide the country through a thicket of tension, conflicting evidence and extreme opinion.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The falsehoods of popular notions of reality would be revealed. Thereafter, Americans would think the same way about violent disorder in black neighborhoods.

1. Bearers of Bad News

For Americans who watched the outbreaks of violence on television, read about them in the newspapers, or heard about them through radios, it appeared that cities around the country were coming apart. In the words of Michael Rogin, Americans have believed that they “were, like Isaac, the children meant to live under law, not, like Ishmael, savage and slave children cast out by Abraham into the wilderness.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The media’s images of rioters in America’s cities terrified not only the political establishment in Washington but ordinary citizens, because it appeared that some Americans had gone down the path of Ishmael. Instead of a polite politics based on patient negotiations over competing ideals, goals, and aspirations – for example, competing notions about how to distribute resources in neighborhoods – the 1967 urban disturbances exhibited rage and defiance, an absence of politics.

But were the media’s accounts accurate? In chapter 15 of the report, “The News Media and the Disorders,” the Commissioners identified four deficiencies in popular coverage. First, the media exaggerated the extent of the violence and monetary damage inflicted on private property. According to the *Kerner Report*, the riots were not as deadly or costly as journalists claimed. The media’s depictions of violence “failed to reflect accurately its scale and character. The overall effect was, we believe, an exaggeration of both mood and event.”[[25]](#footnote-25) For example, the Associated Press reported that the value of the total damage to private and public property in Detroit was more than $1 billion. However, the Michigan State Insurance Commission estimated the total property damage to be between $40 and $45 million dollars.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Second, visual images on television broadcasts and stories in the print media implied that the riots were expressions of racial animosity between black residents and whites “rather than responses by Negroes to underlying slum problems.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Commission investigators determined that this was not true. Rioters did not have racial animus towards all white people. They were, however, angry over the indifference of local authorities to material needs within ghettos and to the greater disadvantages that blacks faced in housing, employment, and overall standard of living.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The mass media’s[[29]](#footnote-29) mistaken and excessive interest in inter-racial hatred pointed to third shortcoming in news media coverage. The media focused on the illegal and criminal nature of the violence, and portrayed those who participated in the violence as thieves, killers, and arsonists, who were either indifferent to or contemptuous of the rule of law. The media thereby ignored an element of the social backdrop. According to the *Kerner Report*, the riots were responses to a structural problem. The rioters were angry and frustrated by the lack of educational, economic, and social opportunities in the ghetto. They wanted equal opportunities to join white society, not opportunities to dismantle it. Two economically distinct societies were emerging side-by-side in America: a white, suburban, affluent order, and a black, urban, impoverished one.[[30]](#footnote-30) “Within two decades, this division could be so deep that it would be almost impossible to unite,” the Report maintained.[[31]](#footnote-31) Television broadcasters and white owned-and-managed newspapers, however, disconnected riots from questions about social division, economic justice and, the bondage of Black Americans within a capitalist society. Instead, the news establishment created “an impression that the riots were predominantly racial confrontations involving clashes between black and white citizens.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Fourth and finally, the news media gave the false impression that urban violence was about to spill into suburbia.[[33]](#footnote-33) The media narrated the riots through the fearful perspective of white suburbanites and relied on terrifying rumors that seemed plausible to correspondents in the field and to editors in their offices. For example, multiple news outlets in Cincinnati ran a partially true story that a group of white youths had armed themselves with bazookas in preparation of an invasion of their neighborhoods by black rioters. Only a handful of the reports added the comically fact that the weapon was inoperable.[[34]](#footnote-34) According to the Commission Report, the photographs and screen shots of armed National Guardsmen patrolling the streets and of police officers aiming their guns tall amid sirens and flames heighted white Americans’ sense of vulnerability to violence. “The media report and write from the standpoint of a white man’s world. The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro’s burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The media, furthermore, “have not shown understanding or appreciation of – and thus have not communicated – a sense of Negro culture, thought, or history.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The Commission offered two suggestions for improving media coverage in the ghettos. One option was organizational. Instead of acting on its own, the news media henceforth should function as a “nerve center for reliable police and official government information [which] should be planned and ready for activation when a disturbance reaches a predetermined point of intensity.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Rather than having reporters directly pester soldiers and police officers trying to regain control of streets, it would be better if correspondents were directed to predetermined places where they could meet with designated spokespersons for the government. That arrangement would allow the government to provide fuller background information to journalists and would lead to less rumor mongering by the press.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The second proposal was to create an Institute of Urban Communications on a private, nonprofit basis. In theory, the Institute would have “neither governmental ties nor governmental authority,” but would be “charged … with general responsibility for carrying out the media recommendations of the Commission.”[[39]](#footnote-39) The Institute, which would be funded initially by private foundations and later by associations of professional journalists, would train and employ aspiring African-American correspondents, editors, and publishers. In exchange, white Americans working in affiliated universities and local news organizations would learn about African-American culture from the apprentice journalists. Besides training African-American journalists, the Institute would build cooperative relations between local journalist and local police departments.[[40]](#footnote-40) The report thought it was best that the Institute, rather than government officials, engage directly in the bridge building, because direct federal government involvement in press-police relations might stir suspicions among some members of the press as well as members of the local police force. Finally, the Institute would regularly assess the accuracy of journalists’ reporting of political events in ghettos, and then publicly praise and criticize the coverage of particular actors and actions.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The *Kerner Report*’s two solutions to media misrepresentations were ultimately proposals for greater government mediation on how social reality was seen by the citizenry. This was not portrayed as the state imposing its thinking upon citizens. It was portrayed as liberating an uninformed public from the falsehoods of an unregulated press. The federal government, according to the Report, needed to take steps to prevent journalistic investigators from running amok, and to assure that the public would see the world through an undistorted lens.

But what would an undistorted vision of society look like? Would the Commission’s proposals, if implemented, ensure non-biased coverage? Might the interests of state elites (and the interests of the various social groups and interests that were promoted by the state) affect the images presented to citizens? The Commission’s own account of the riots provided partial answers to questions about scraping away media distortions and then uncovering the real story of the riots.

III. Father Knows Best

Johnson never intervened directly in the composition of the final draft of the Kerner Commission’s report (although, according to several political observers, when he heard about an early draft that was critical of his War on Poverty for being economical superficial and politically timid and of the Crime Commission’s theories about the ramifications of mother-led families, he refused to receive that manuscript and arranged for the dismissal of the staffers who worked on it[[42]](#footnote-42)). Johnson, instead, tried to shape the report’s conclusions obliquely, through the appointment of influential politicians and prestigious social leaders whose views on good government generally resembled his vision.

All the Commissioners were “liberals” in the sense that the term was used in the late 1960s. Like Johnson, they believed in the efficacy of the free market in producing well-paying jobs and plentiful and affordable goods. They had faith that productive potential of the country was enormous, that the output of a largely unregulated economy had been growing quickly, and that it would continue to do so, even if the national government would incrementally increase taxes now and then. The result, the Commissioners wrote, was a steady rise in private and public prosperity—the latter due to “truly astounding automatic increases in Federal budget receipts.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

They also believed that the national government had a moral duty to make sure that market-produced jobs and goods were available to all Americans who were willing to work hard and live ethically. The proverbial “American dream” of a comfortable life in exchange for honest work was to be shared by all who were deserving.[[44]](#footnote-44) The Commissioners described themselves morally as keepers of Lincoln’s dream of the Union as a political entity devoted to the elimination of “all barriers” to citizens’ “choice of jobs, education, and housing.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The proper goal of the United States is not to implement a particular set of policies. “The goal must be achieving freedom for every citizen to live and work according to his capacities and desires, not his color.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

 From the perspective of Johnson, the Commissioners, and many other post-World War II liberals, many of the domestic problems confronting America were leftovers from the South’s immoral practice of slavery and the North’s long-standing tolerance of that peculiar economic, social, legal, and cultural institution. As the US liberals saw their country’s history: prior to the Civil War, a large portion of the nation’s workforce had not come to the country freely. Stolen and shackled, kidnapped Africans and their descendants had to endure horrors hurled by white slave owners and blithely accepted by white non-owners. After slavery was formally abolished, most whites in the United States were loath to help Americans with black skins. Instead, whites continued to oppress and exploit these vulnerable members of society, and justified the mistreatment by attributing non-human characteristics onto fellow citizens whose skin color was not white.

Herein lies the true origins of the summers of spontaneous disorder. From the hardships and misery generated by discrimination and segregation, violence arose in city streets. Without steps to eradicate what the *Kerner Report* called “white racism,” violence was likely to continue.[[47]](#footnote-47)

To end riots, the Kerner Commission recommended a comprehensive attack on the multitude of degradations and deprivations that whites have heaped upon blacks. This task was large, expensive, but do-able, argued the Commissioners. What the Commissioners considered less doable was converting racist whites, so that they would admit that they and their forebears daily discriminate against blacks and that they, therefore, are responsible for the urban-street violence that they find repellant.

For 1960s liberals, the nation state was the best instrument for ending discrimination and providing material resources and social services necessary for black Americans to enjoy meaningful choice in their work lives and home lives. Liberals considered state and local governments, whether in the rural South or the suburban and industrial North and West, bastions for White racism, special interests, and narrowmindedness in general. Only the national government sought and could achieve the country’s ethical vision.

The authors of the *Kerner Report* shared this common liberal prejudice in favor of big government. In their opinion, “Only a greatly enlarged commitment to national action—compassionate, massive and sustained, backed by the will and resources of the most powerful and the richest nation on this earth—can shape a future that is compatible with the historic ideals of American society.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Adopting these theoretical parameters, the Kerner Commission presented its vision of reality. The first two chapters of the report challenged media claims about riots being “criminal types, overactive social deviants, or riffraff.”[[49]](#footnote-49) The Commission found that contrary to media headlines, recent street violence did not portend a takeover of cities by shiftless, amoral creatures. Those who threw rocks and firebombs were neither deviants nor criminals.

The typical rioter in the summer of 1967 was a Negro, unmarried male between the ages of 15 and 24. He was in many ways very different from the stereotype. He was not a migrant. He was born in the state and was a life-long resident of the city….Although he had not, usually, graduated from high school, he was somewhat better educated than the average inner-city Negro….He feels strongly that he deserves a better job and that he is barred from achieving it not because of lack of training , ability, or ambition, but because of discrimination by employers….He is extremely hostile to whites, but his hostility is more apt to be a product of social and economic class than of race; he is almost equally hostile toward middle class Negroes.

He is substantially better informed about politics than Negroes who were not involved in the riots. He is more likely to be actively engaged in civil rights efforts, but is extremely distrustful of the political system and of political leaders.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Violent action expressed feelings of economic injustice—in particular, the absence of fair access to well-paying and dignified jobs. Black people who participated in the 1967 civil disorders were not trying to destroy America’s political institutions. Rather, they were frustrated over the absence of opportunities to join the middle class and wanted outsiders to know of their situation and their anger.

The *Kerner Report*, in addition, noted that many residents in predominantly African-American neighborhoods were not rioters, but counter-rioters. The counter-rioter was a model citizen. He policed dangerous city streets and pleaded with violent neighbors to “‘cool it.’”[[51]](#footnote-51) According to the report, “His actions and his attitudes reflected his substantially greater stake in the social system; he was considerably better educated and more affluent than either the rioter or the noninvolved.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Smoldering ghettos thus were settings with at least two types of black male political actors, neither of who was savage, deviant, or unprincipled.

After correcting misconceptions about the motivations and social characteristics of America’s black rioters, the Commission’s report spent 70 pages describing the history of slavery, of the Great Migration of millions of African Americans from rural regions in the South to northern cities, and of the development of black ghettos and the causes of their poverty. Toward the end of the report, the historical tracking of social change resumed in a chapter on the future of US cities. The purpose of the lesson in black history was to convince readers that the United States was crumbling into two dissimilar societies: one white, rich, and found in suburbs, in smaller cities, and in bedroom communities that form the outer circles of metropoles; and one black, poor, and located in inner-cities.[[53]](#footnote-53)

This division was no accident, the authors averred. Since the Civil War, white Americans had willingly adopted banking, educational, housing, and employment practices that left blacks at a profound and systematic disadvantage. New arrivals to northern cities huddled for self-protection in dilapidated buildings and worked at demeaning jobs for poor pay. That, in the opinion of the Commission, has led to a situation “with the most ominous consequences for our society.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

True, the overall US economy has grown dramatically since the end of World War II. This has led to rising wages, higher standards of living, and an increase in the number of middle-class black households. However, the relative gap in employment opportunities and standards of living between inner-city blacks and suburban whites has persisted, if not expanded.[[55]](#footnote-55)

The persistent and blatant inequality between blacks and whites in their opportunities to find jobs and better themselves economically fed the disorder and destruction in the streets, according to the Kerner Commission. The violence was not aimless, and the participants were not wild men and women who wanted to destroy pell-mell. There was a purpose to the burnings and attacks on property. Many blacks wanted to express their resentment about the deprivations and indignities they have endured on account of their color. The Commissioners surmised that unless economic conditions of blacks rapidly and dramatically change, the feelings of outrage could lead to larger waves of violence in coming years and even to growing support for revolutionary projects.[[56]](#footnote-56)

To avert the polarization of the country into two racially and economically defined societies, the federal government must act to reduce the difference in economic opportunities of Whites and Blacks. The final portion of the report discussed the types of political action needed. The report contrasted three basic choices: doing nothing and letting history take its course; continuing to implement Johnson’s Great Society proposals; and undertaking a more ambitious set of reforms.[[57]](#footnote-57) The Commission maintained that the first two options were too modest given the scale of the scales of the economic problems to be solved. A more extensive (and expensive) set of government projects were needed, and even those programs would have to be in place for decades before they bore economic fruit and reduced the outrage among blacks.

The Commissioners considered job creation and training as deserving to be among the federal government’s highest priorities. They reasoned that “if there could be immediate action on meaningful job training and the creation of productive jobs for large numbers of unemployed young people, they would become much less likely to engage in civil disorders.”[[58]](#footnote-58) The Commission advised the government over the next three years to create 1 million new jobs in the private sector and 1 million in the public sector. The government could reach these goals by motivating companies unobtrusively, through tax incentives and other financial inducements, to hire Blacks first as interns and then as more permanent members of the companies’ workforces.[[59]](#footnote-59) In addition, the government, working with unions and business leaders, should oversee recruiting and promotion policies to make sure the publicized “minimum requirements” were flexible and relevant, that testing procedures whenever possible be replaced by physical tryouts, and that employers keep in mind such non-documented but important character traits as native intelligence and perseverance.[[60]](#footnote-60)

To prepare inner-city African Americans for a modern workplace, the federal government would also need to establish a training program on dress, hygiene, etiquette, punctuality, money management, and other norms and skills of the business world.[[61]](#footnote-61) The Commission proposed delegating such vocational and social training to private companies, whose programs would be monitored by the federal government and funded through public funds and private philanthropy. To make sure that tax payers’ monies were not being spent on slackers and shiftless characters, the federal government would establish a new manpower-service agency. It would determine the worthiness of individuals for job training and dispense a document, tentatively called a “certificate of eligibility,” that would entitle the recipient to social services and employment opportunities.[[62]](#footnote-62) The Commission had no illusions about the price tag of this huge endeavor (“Creation of jobs for the hard-core unemployed will require substantial payments to both public and private employers to offset the extra costs of supportive services and trainings.”[[63]](#footnote-63)), but thought the policies do-able so long as citizens were willing to be taxed.[[64]](#footnote-64)

In addition, the Kerner Commission recommended that the federal government should repair and replace the deteriorating buildings and transportation systems within Black urban communities, and help finance a host of social services, from garbage collection to pre-school education. Allegedly, extant municipal governments were too financially strapped and bureaucratically inefficient to service their communities properly. To do this, the federal government should create a new level of administration. In theory, elected officials, leaders of private businesses and local unions, and spokespersons for neighborhood residents would meet regularly, discuss ghetto conditions, and propose remedies. The local proposals, if reasonable, would then be implemented through a mixture of federal government monies and private philanthropy.[[65]](#footnote-65)

This vision of local-level consultation, the Commissioners added, was not the sort of participatory democracy and system of neighborhood independence that contemporary theorists of Black Power proposed.[[66]](#footnote-66) After all, to attain equal opportunity with whites, blacks needed the resources that white society controlled. Otherwise, a system of black self-rule would perpetuate the current economic gap between Black and White society.

The economy of the United States and particularly the sources of employment are preponderantly white. In this circumstance, a policy of separate but equal employment could only relegate Negroes permanently to inferior incomes and economic status.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The Kerner Commission, in other words, was not recommending communitarian self-rule through assemblies open to all residents. It was proposing the institutionalization of formal conversations between black representatives of urban governments and of local neighborhoods, and White representatives of the worlds of business and labor. It was a type of grass-roots administration, but one that occurred under the watchful eye and financial control of the federal government and with the direct participation of white economic interests.

Last but perhaps not least, the Commission counseled greater federal-government involvement in local cultural politics. Each neighborhood, argued the *Kerner Report*, should have “a ‘Rumor Central’—an office responsible for the collection, evaluation, and countering of rumors which could lead to civil disorder.”[[68]](#footnote-68) The federal government would finance these listening centers. They would be located outside police departments, although “they should work closely with police and other public officials.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

1. Subversives among Us

Tucked at the center of the report is a two-page section entitled “Organized Activity.” Comprising 12 paragraphs and accounting for less than 2 pages, it is by far the shortest chapter in the 480-page tome. The authors explain at the outset that the chapter exists at Johnson’s behest. “The President directed the Commission to investigate ‘to what extent, if any there has been planning or organization in any of the riots.’”[[70]](#footnote-70)

Members of Johnson’s cabinet disagreed on whether the riots were manifestations of a conspiracy to undermine the country. Johnson himself wondered if the violence was caused by “poisonous propagandists” who posed as friends of the poor but who were, in reality, enemies of the country.[[71]](#footnote-71) Were the disorders more than parallel events, disconnected except for possible attempts by rioters to imitate actions broadcasted by the media? Or, were leaders, organization, and strategy involved? If so, were the series of summer time violent actions akin to a rebellion or attempted revolution?

These were hardly new fears among the Washington elite during the Cold War years, or among the white mainstream press more generally. Since the early 1960s, fears that various forms of black violence and crime could evolve into “a guerrilla war” had terrified members of the President’s cabinet.[[72]](#footnote-72) Nor was this solely a nightmare among Johnson’s circle of liberal Democrats. In Congress, Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans argued, while passing an anti-riot bill in the summer of 1967, that the riots were the work of conspirators, probably either Black revolutionaries or Communists.[[73]](#footnote-73) Pundit Garry Wills, at the time a frequent contributor the conservative public-opinion magazine, *The National Review*, called his 1968 book on contemporary and combative race relations *The Second Civil War*. Meanwhile, beltway newspapers reported on Stokely Carmichael’s visit to Cuba during the Detroit Rebellion and portrayed his Black power rhetoric as declarations of war.[[74]](#footnote-74)

 The Kerner Commission took such nightmares seriously and seemed to leave no stone unturned in its search for the truth about the possible connections between urban disorders to revolutionary subversion. The “Organized Activity” chapter listed the numerous governmental security agencies (including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency) that provided the Commission’s staff with data, field reports, and criminological analyses. The Commission’s research team “maintained continuous liaison with these [governmental] organizations throughout its investigation.”[[75]](#footnote-75) In addition, the Commission’s “special staff investigators” interviewed over 400 people, including “black militants,” and collected information about the finances, the domestic and foreign organizational affiliations, and the travel schedules of individuals suspected of being “dedicated to the incitement or encouragement of violence.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Last but not least, the Commission also “investigated hundreds of rumors” about “sniper gangs, guerrilla training camps,” and “caches” of arms.[[77]](#footnote-77)

 The Commission’s conclusion in “Organized Activity” was that “the urban disorders of the summer of 1967 were not caused by, nor were they the consequence of any organized plan or ‘conspiracy’.” The authors immediately repeated the point, in case there was a chance of misunderstanding: “the Commission has found no evidence that all or any of the disorders or the incidents that led to them were planned or directed by any organization or group—international, national, or local.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

On first glance, this finding was reassuring. No subversives were orchestrating events. However, instead of ending on this happy note, the chapter continued and, in its final four paragraphs, warned of hidden “militant organizations” and “individual agitators.” They, allegedly, had fanned the emotions of rioters through words and thereby “did have an effect in creating an atmosphere that contributed to the outbreak of disorder.” Moreover, the Commission predicted that these groups and persons would later attempt “organized exploitation” of social discontent.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Having declared the existence of half-hidden subversives who plotted to manipulate unhappy blacks, the short chapter closed with a call for continued surveillance of militant groups and radical individuals “particularly in schools and colleges.”[[80]](#footnote-80) The entire apparatus of the modern American state—local police departments, grand juries, Federal departments and agencies, and congressional committees—should monitor suspected radicals.[[81]](#footnote-81) Even if few of the rioters were either ideological radicals or belonged to revolutionary groups, the presence of subversives who wished to overthrow the status quo was not in doubt. Therefore, the host of local and national investigatory processes that were established under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, and Johnson administrations should not be dismantled. “They should continue.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

Placed at the physical center of the *Kerner Report*, “Organized Activity” disclosed the Report’s half-hidden counter-subversive heart. A security state, the Commission averred, was needed because underneath the peace and prosperity of post-World War II America lurked groups seeking to overthrow the status quo through non-democratic, violent means.

Counter-subversive thinking is not new in the United States, of course. Since the days of the English colonies, leaders on pulpits and in courthouse have alleged that the country’s non-aggressive, hard-working, and law-abiding citizens are surrounded by sinful, lustful, and violent beings, intent on overthrowing a decent social order.[[83]](#footnote-83) What was fresh in the *Kerner Report* was the place of alleged subversive activities: institutions of higher education. Here, the report was a product of its time. The end of World War II had brought an unprecedented growth in the number and sizes of both secondary schools and colleges and universities. For the first time, young adults, many from working-class and destitute families, spent time on college campuses, away from the watchful eyes of adults and moral authorities. This was a source of anxiety for all adult observers, not only parents.

Viewing students as wayward children, the report detailed how “militants”—in particular, advocates of black power—travelled from campus to campus. There, they had encouraged listeners to contemplate overthrowing existing social and political arrangements and starting afresh.[[84]](#footnote-84) So far, the radicals had not had on impact on events in the ghetto. But the report recommended that for America to be safe, the country needed to surveil its campuses more extensively.

1. Closing Thoughts on American Story Telling

When Johnson received the *Kerner Report*, he quietly set it aside. There was no public celebration or words of praise. Johnson wished to bury the study, and if not for a draft copy leaked to the *Washington Post*, the Commission might have been forgotten. He considered the document’s policy prescriptions unaffordable at a time when the nation’s budget was buckling under the strain of fighting an unpopular war. He interpreted the report’s call for more ambitious anti-poverty programs as a thinly veiled critique of his Great Society initiatives. And he found the notions of two societies and of white racism unnecessary, gloomy, and vexing. It was not, he thought, a document designed to attract public support.[[85]](#footnote-85)

 But, to his surprise and to the surprise of others, the *Kerner Report* was eagerly read. In fact, it landed on the *New York Times* best-seller list; one night, millions of fans of Joey Bishop’s late-night talk show turned on their televisions to hear the actor Marlon Brandon read excerpts from the report aloud.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Part of the reason for the *Kerner Report*’s popularity may have been its implicit storyline. The report in effect offered readers an updated rescue story, where a noble, white hero (this time played by the state) boldly and selflessly saved an impotent victim (in this case, the millions of black migrants who fled the oppression of the rural South for the opportunities and freedoms manufacturing towns and industrial hubs). The picture was reassuring in a number of ways. The nation state was portrayed as immensely powerful, competent, and more than willing to come to the aid of the profoundly powerless. Readers were told that with the assistance of reliable sidekicks in private industry and labor unions, the state would succeed in its rescue mission. Unions and businesses would aid the state, but they would not manipulate or deceive it.

Blacks, meanwhile, were interpreted as innocent and, for the moment, non-threatening. Unlike the sensationalist media headlines that warned readers of either rampaging blacks or indoctrinated followers of a subversive black-power movement, the Commissioners described cities as containing a plethora of neighborhoods with law abiding-citizens. Allegedly, most African-Americans “are firmly rooted in the basic values of American society.”[[87]](#footnote-87) In the Commissioners’ opinion, “Negro protest in the current period has aimed at the inclusion of Negroes in American society on a basis of full equality, rather than at a fundamental transformation of American institutions.”[[88]](#footnote-88)

According to the report, the source of domestic evil—the institutional and attitudinal legacies of slavery—could be destroyed without the broader social order being damaged or set back. The evil was clearly identified and separated from an otherwise innocent American social order. Other than institutionalized white racism, America was indeed the promised land of prosperity and individual freedom where those who entered the world with little might acquire a lot. The state saved; capitalism worked.

But as Hinton points out, the *Kerner Report*, while using a familiar liberal rhetoric about the nobility of the state and the health of American society (save the persistence of white racism), had an authoritarian side.[[89]](#footnote-89) Alongside its attacks on institutionalized forms of racism are endorsements of governmental surveillance of suspected subversives on college campuses, the promotion of journalistic accuracy through greater government involvement in fact-finding processes, and the certification the worthiness of poor people for unemployment aid.

The flip side of the report’s advocacy of an expansion in the state’s supervision of citizens’ lives was the report’s repeated stigmatization of local autonomy. City governments and neighborhood councils were, supposedly, too weak, morally narrow-minded, and administratively inept to solve the problems of racism. They needed to work under the direction of the wiser national protectorate. The report’s narrative implied that everyday people—both racist whites and frustrated blacks and their elected representatives in local government—were unable to rule themselves. A higher authority was needed to impose proper values and regulate behavior.

Besides offering a defense for a more hierarchical political order, the report drew attention away from what used to be called the “Social Question”: how should we deal with the army of unemployed individuals that capitalism’s boom-and-bust cycles, pursuit of profits, and endless technological and organizational innovations generate? The report treated the nation’s economy as benign, its growth as normal, and its profits and payrolls as the source (via tax receipts) of the federal government’s growing power to reform the world. But is modern American capitalism free of problems? Is it simply benign? Is its growth straight forward? Is the phenomenon of “permanent unemployment” incidental? And are any of the possible negative consequences of a capitalist economy related to the phenomenon of white racism that the report denounces?

The authors of the *Kerner Report* had attempted to meet the charge of President Johnson: to replace conventional wisdom with a true understanding of contemporary social disorder. The Commissioners only partly met that charge. They replaced rumors in the mass media with a new piece of fiction that masked the state’s own interests and service to other social groups, that looked away from structural economic problems, and that cast aspersions onto notions of local self-rule. One myth was replaced by another.

1. Quoted in Julian E. Zelizer, “Introduction” in *The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War of Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Figures from Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 203-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the politics and findings of the Crime Commission, see Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 96-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a survey of similarities and differences among the urban disorders of 1965-1967, see Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality*, 200-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lyndon Baines Johnson, “Remarks of the President upon Issuing an Executive Order Establishing a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, July 29, 1967,” in *Kerner Report*, 481. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In labeling aspects of the Kerner Report romantic, comedic, gothic, and so forth, we draw upon Hayden White’s recommendations about how to uncover narratives embedded within self-described non-narrative (or historical) texts. According to White, an interpreter can detect a narrative in any non-fictional account of social reality so long as the interpreter considers (1) modes of emplotment, (2) patterns of social causality, and (3) the author’s declared ideological positions. White’s position is complex, but here are its bare bones. By “emplotment,” White has in mind a historian’s (or social scientist’s) tale about a collective or individual actor or agent (say, the ruling party of Britain) who, in the pursuit of identifiable goals, confronts and sometimes overcomes expected and unexpected challenges. There are many ways (comic, tragic, satiric, ironic, and so on) such a story can be told. “Mode of causality” refers to the types of influences and lengths of causal chains that a historian (or social scientist) normally has in mind when he or she describes social change or obstacles to change. “Ideology” refers to the author’s openly declared sympathy or opposition toward the society in which he or she lives. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimeis Effect* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The report is replete with references to “rumors” and with juxtapositions between mere rumors and the verifiable “facts” that the document contains. *Kerner Report*, 3, 19, 21, 40-1, 47, 52, 87, 91, 227, 292, 326-7, 373-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present, Revised and Updated Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For the fracturing of the Civil Rights movement, see Sitkoff, *Struggle for Black Equality* and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Zelizer, “Introduction,” *Kerner Report*, xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Zelizer, *Kerner Report*, xvii; David Weiner, “The Forgotten Case of Paul Crump,” *The Chicago Tribune*, June 20, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. John Herbers, “The *Kerner Report*: A Journalist’s View” in Fred R. Harris and Roger W. Wilkins, eds., *Quiet Riots: Race and Poverty in the United States* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Johnson, “Remarks of the President,” 480. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Kerner Report*, 21, 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Or, as the *Kerner Report* occasionally put it, the “white press,” 368, 383-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 1-2, 396-407. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 373-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 22, 380-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 22, 387-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 388 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Zelizer, “Introduction,” xxiv-xxv; Andrew Kopkind, “White on Black: The Riot Commission and the Rhetoric of Reform” in Anthony Platt, ed., *The Politics of Riot Commissions 1917-1970: A Collection of Official Reports and Critical Essays* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), 379, 381, 386-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Kerner Report*, 411. See also 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For more on the meaning of “liberalism” in the United States between 1950 and 1980, see Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* (Boston: St. Martin’s, 1995); and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Boston: Free Press, 2001). For a summary of how conservatives, liberals, and radicals differed in their interpretations of the 1960s riots, see Flamm, *Law and Order*, 96-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Kerner Report*, 405. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 405, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 10, 207. See also Johnson’s 1965 Commencement Address at Howard University, which contains most of the constellation of ideas that constitute the *Kerner Report*’s theory of white racism. Lyndon Baines Johnson, “To Fulfill These Rights,” excerpts in Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, 201-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 410. See also 1, 23-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., 124-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 396, 398-400. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid., 405 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. In the words of the Commission: if the current division of America into two societies persists, then “a rising proportion of negroes in disadvantaged city areas might come to look upon the deprivation and segregation they suffer as proper justification for violent protest or for extending support to now isolated extremists who advocate civil disruption by guerrilla tactics.” *Kerner Report*, 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 395-402. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 416 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 416, 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 24, 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 411-13, 470-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 209, 234-6, 403-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., 19, 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid. The exact powers of the “Rumor Centrals” remain sketchy but could be significant, in light of the wiretapping, mail opening, and other counter-subversive activities undertaken by the federal government during the Cold War. Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, 68-80; Flamm, *Law and Order*, 117-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. *Kerner Report*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 110. See all Flamm, *Law and Order*, 225 ft. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., 97, 106-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Carson, *In Struggle*, 257-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *Kerner Report*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid*.*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Ibid., 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, 44-68, 272-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. *Kerner Report*, 42, 52-57, 227, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. On Johnson’s cool reception of the document, see Zelizer, “Introduction,” xxx-xxxi; Herbers, “*Kerner Report*,” 21-2; Fred R. Harris “The 1967 Riots and the Kerner Commission” in Harris and Wilkins, *Quiet Riot*s, 13; Flamm, *Law and Order*, 108-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Zelizer, “Introduction,” xxxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. *Kerner Report*, 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid., 237 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty*, 130-31. In making this claim, Hinton stressed the report’s contribution to emerging punitive doctrines about law and order and about militarized policing of black neighborhoods. This paper adds to her list of concerns the *Kerner Report*’s worries about campus revolutionaries, its aversion to local autonomy, and its legitimation of post-war corporate capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)