



## The Sixties

A Journal of History, Politics and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsix20>

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To cite this article: Malcolm McLaughlin (2021) The story of America: the Kerner report, national leadership, and liberal renewal, 1967-1968, *The Sixties*, 14:1, 20-52, DOI: [10.1080/17541328.2021.1928827](https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2021.1928827)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2021.1928827>



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Published online: 23 May 2021.



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## The story of America: the Kerner report, national leadership, and liberal renewal, 1967-1968

Malcolm McLaughlin

School of Art, Media, and American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK


### ABSTRACT

Long remembered for its warning that the United States, divided by racism, was becoming “two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal,” the report of the Kerner commission (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders) made a landmark contribution to public debate in 1968. The paperback edition quickly became a bestseller that year, and even though it failed to influence Lyndon B. Johnson’s embattled presidency, it found a wide readership. This article examines the report in context, approaching it as an example of political narrative writing at a time when centrist, “establishment” liberals attempted to reconcile their rhetorical ideal of a democratic national purpose with the realities of racism. It considers how the report reframed the national story by positioning racial justice as the central test of democracy. And it assesses how far, in that light, it succeeded in renewing the idea of liberal national leadership.

### KEYWORDS

Liberalism; nation; centrist; establishment; Great Society; Civil Rights; Black Power; ghetto; racial justice; Kerner commission (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders)

By the end of the 1960s, as the custodians of an aging political tradition, American liberals found themselves in need of a new narrative to make their centrist national leadership relevant in changing times. Theirs was the liberalism that had emerged out of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal (1933–1945) and the Fair Deal of President Harry S. Truman’s time (1945–1953), although it amounted to more than simply their policy agenda, or that of their Democratic Party. Constituting what Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, called the “vital center” of a world torn between fascism and communism, it came to define the national priorities of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Strategically, it set out to use national government to manage the capitalist economy while suppressing communism, seeking to secure democratic rights within that framework. In a pragmatic spirit of bipartisan compromise and moderation, such liberals established an apparent consensus around those priorities. And down to the 1960s, in such terms, they presumed to define a national purpose, rhetorically encompassing the

**CONTACT** Malcolm McLaughlin  [m.mclaughlin@uea.ac.uk](mailto:m.mclaughlin@uea.ac.uk)  School of Art, Media, and American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich, Norfolk, NR4 7TJ, UK

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aspirations of what they conceived as a cohesive American people. Looking back at President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society campaign of 1964–1969, for example, what is conspicuous about his program of civil rights, social welfare, and environmental reform, alongside its ambition, is its assertion of common values and shared purpose. Thus, in 1964, LBJ called the Great Society “the test of our success as a Nation,” its goals the very “purpose of protecting the life of our Nation.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, even though Johnson won a landslide that same year, the national idea his rhetoric presupposed was increasingly being questioned.<sup>3</sup> The Vietnam War sapped liberals' moral authority and public confidence in the institutions they had shaped, while Black Power and the New Left challenged their assumptions about national identity. In that moment, centrist liberals needed a new story to restore the credibility of their claim to speak for the whole nation. The following discussion evaluates their efforts.

Specifically, the work here looks at the report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the Kerner commission, as an example of narrative writing by centrist, establishment liberals. The commission was President Johnson's bipartisan investigation into the “long, hot summers” of ghetto protest and street violence that swept the country between 1964 and 1968. Appointed in July 1967, after a fourth successive year of civil unrest, and completed in February 1968, just weeks before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr, unleashed more violence, the Kerner commission's report appeared at a time of acute concern. Largely, it affirmed a liberal view that poverty and racism had created an “explosive mixture” of anger in the ghetto, and it advocated a renewed effort to integrate society. In truth, it had no influence over what remained of LBJ's presidency. Increasingly consumed by Vietnam and economic woes, he notoriously gave it a cold reception.<sup>4</sup> Although a policy failure, it nevertheless had considerable cultural impact. Coming on the heels of a nationwide crisis, the Kerner report was released to exceptional public anticipation. While the Government Printing Office made it available as a bound volume, Bantam Books quickly published the report in full as a portable, inexpensive, mass-market paperback edition, and it went on to become 1968's most unlikely bestseller.<sup>5</sup>

The Kerner report should be remembered, then, for successfully engaging public interest despite its lack of policy achievement. As Hugh Davis Graham has noted, such national investigations of domestic crises have often achieved public reach beyond their policy impact. This was true of the Kerner commission, he suggested, as well as a number of other related investigations of the time, including the Warren (John F. Kennedy assassination), Eisenhower (violence), and Scranton (campus unrest) commissions.<sup>6</sup> And as Amy Zegart has suggested, rather than evaluating commissions only by their policy impact, a better approach is to consider “their intended core function” – and policy impact might not be the best

measure of this.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, considering that the president tasked the Kerner commission with explaining what happened and why, as well as advising on measures to prevent riots, judging it by its policy influence alone would indeed overlook its important mission to explain the causes of the crisis.<sup>8</sup>

There again, the Kerner commission reached some way beyond a narrow interpretation of its instructions in its final report. Weaving government statistics and social science into simply written narratives, surveying the history of racial discrimination, documenting the shocking conditions of the ghetto, and looking into the future, the report invited readers to reflect on the national record, and to contrast the social reality it described with their presumed democratic ideals. While it documented and categorized the civil disorders themselves, and described specific policies covering policing and justice, insurance, the media, and programs of employment, education, welfare, and housing, its most compelling passages related those proposed reforms to a larger narrative about the meaning of American national life. Fundamentally, its impact should be judged on these terms. Testament to the Kerner report's enduring resonance, Americans would long recall its prophetic warning that without decisive action, the nation would permanently become "two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal." Ten, twenty, fifty years later, liberals still recalled the Kerner report's idealism in lamenting the persistence of racial inequality, and continued to see it not merely as an important problem of democracy, but the main test of the success of the nation.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, it can be said that while the Kerner commission's recommendations for government action were never realized, while for decades to come it proved impossible to rally a democratic majority in favor of the tax and spending commitments they implied, the story it told, of a nation aspiring to realize itself by becoming a casteless republic, was of lasting importance. And in this respect, the Kerner report achieved most as a narrative, defining the democratic national purpose as inseparable from racial equality.

The Kerner report's story was all the more significant for being contained within a government document. And this was true even though the president sidelined the report, because liberalism was bigger than LBJ, the Great Society – or the Democratic Party for that matter. Rather, liberalism's principles animated the work of national institutions as its assumptions about strategic priorities – the need to balance business interests and democratic rights – established a tacit imperative and a shared sense of purpose in public life. The Kerner commission had a good claim to embody the range of social interests and institutions that fell in behind liberal leadership on those terms. So, while President Johnson had taken political leadership in promoting civil rights legislation, the Kerner commission, as a broad, bipartisan embodiment of civil society, could in contrast presume

itself to be above politics while speaking for the nation. One implication of this is that it can be said to have carried more authority than that other landmark study of race in the United States, published almost a quarter of a century earlier, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), written for the Carnegie Foundation.<sup>10</sup> The Kerner report carried an official seal of approval, so to speak, but one beyond party, or special interest. And for that reason, it made a powerful statement about the acceptance of the civil rights agenda into the national mainstream. This bears emphasis. Describing racism as a systemic problem across America, the Kerner report resembled the analysis Martin Luther King, Jr, developed as he turned to black communities beyond the South and found discrimination in the labor market, in housing, and throughout the nation's institutional fabric.<sup>11</sup> The Kerner commission effectively presented that analysis of racism as the national consensus view. Less than a generation before, the Civil Rights cause had been an insurgent social movement. In the Kerner report, its democratic demands defined the political centerground.

That said, the publication of this government report as a mass-market paperback had a decisive influence on how readers would approach the text and interpret its meaning. It joined a growing list of current-affairs books dealing with racial justice and related social issues, then being packaged for popular consumption by publishers. Bantam presented it in such terms, and cross-sold it with other books on its list, including *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (1967), Robert Conot's description of the 1965 Watts uprising, for example, or *Black Rage* (1968, first by Basic Books, and then by Bantam as a paperback the following year), described as a study of "the desperation, the conflicts, and the anger of the black man's life in America today," written by William H. Grieg and Price M. Cobbs.<sup>12</sup> After Conot was hired by the Kerner commission, Bantam made use of the connection: *Rivers of Blood*, it declared on the front cover, was "the explosive bestseller" by a "consultant to the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the addition of a foreword by one of the commissioners, Senator Fred R. Harris, hitched *Black Rage* to the Kerner report. In case the reader missed the point, both of those two books carried full-page advertisements for the Bantam edition of the Kerner report.

Although it was essentially a government document, the packaging of the paperback and the inclusion of an introduction by Tom Wicker of *The New York Times* ensured the Bantam edition would not have looked out of place on a shelf alongside celebrated journalistic accounts of other notorious flashpoints of the 1960s-1970s – such as Conot's *Rivers of Blood*, or the likes of John Hersey's investigation of police brutality during the 1967 Detroit rebellion, *The Algiers Motel Incident* (1968), or Tom Wicker's later landmark account of the 1971 Attica prison uprising, *A Time to Die* (1975), which he wrote after being invited in as a mediator during the crisis.<sup>14</sup> The

Kerner report thus contributed to a moment when Americans were critically appraising the limits of liberalism's achievements in the 1960s, and there was an increasingly widespread public recognition of the need to understand racism through the experience of the ghetto, of urban poverty, police violence, and unequal justice. Specifically, it acknowledged the nation's future and the health of its democracy would be inseparable from the problems of racism as they were expressed in the cities.

Nevertheless, historians have not typically considered the contribution of the Kerner report to the renewal of centrist liberalism during the 1960s. It has, for example, been largely relegated to the background in some notable narrative histories of the decade, including those of Allen J. Matusow (1984), and Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin (2000).<sup>15</sup> It is absent from Gary Gerstle's important study of nationalism, *American Crucible*, even though the political events of the 1960s are crucial to his narrative arc (2001, updated 2017).<sup>16</sup> But equally, where they have considered the Kerner commission's context, historians have more narrowly been interested in what it can show about the political decline of liberalism and the corresponding rise of the new right. This is true of Michael W. Flamm's *Law and Order* (2005), for instance, or studies of the Johnson administration by David C. Carter (2009) or Randall Bennett Woods (2016).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Steven M. Gillon's *Separate and Unequal* (2018) saw the time of the Kerner commission as the age of liberalism's "unraveling."<sup>18</sup>

What has been missed is an opportunity to learn, by studying the work of the Kerner commission, how liberals aligned with the political establishment regenerated their ideas to reimagine the nation in light of the civil rights revolution. With that in mind, the discussion below argues that centrist liberalism was in the process of renewal rather than unraveling during this period. While interpretations that emphasize crisis or unraveling do not preclude the possibility that liberalism was in a process of transformation, the argument below suggests a more purposeful process of change than either of those other words might imply. At the same time, it does not express regret for the passing of a previous age, but sees the Kerner report as a milestone in the development of a more sophisticated concept of the nation. In other words, its story of America was one that could encompass the enlarged idea of nation in the Civil Rights Era.

In this respect, the work here sees more progressive potential in that centrist liberal philosophy than many historians have acknowledged. For example, Robin Marie Averbeck (2018) has argued the Kerner commission exposed "the inability of postwar liberalism" (or "racial capitalism" as she critically defines it), "to take on racial and economic injustice."<sup>19</sup> And this interpretation is representative of the weight of academic opinion that holds liberalism, in the form that emerged from the New Deal and Fair Deal periods, responsible for perpetuating racism. It is the view that can be found,

sometimes explicitly, sometimes as an undercurrent, in books by Douglas D. Massey and Nancy A. Denton (1993), Thomas J. Sugrue (1996, 2008), George Lipsitz (1998), or Robert O. Self (2003), for example.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Van Gosse (2002, 2003), saw the abandonment of postwar liberalism as key to the emergence of what he conceived as a more democratic, multicultural society.<sup>21</sup> What those interpretations share is an emphasis upon the (undeniable) contribution of the activist left to the remaking of liberalism as a force for democratic, multicultural pluralism. The discussion below offers a complementary perspective, one that shows a postwar liberalism, emphasizing democratic rights and the common bonds of republican citizenship, in the process of change and evolution.

In order to understand how the Kerner report contributed to liberal reinvention at the end of the Sixties, the work below examines the popular paperback edition in context, drawing on the archives of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. It looks at the three key narrative themes, in which the Kerner commission attempted to construct a national idealism that could reconcile the political economy of the postwar social order with a vision of a racially integrated society. Those themes were, specifically: the history of black citizenship in America, the present social environment of the ghetto, and the future of the cities. In those narratives, it is possible to see how the Kerner commission made the case for liberal national leadership as it positioned the search for racial equality as essential to the realization of what it defined as America's historic democratic purpose. In doing so, it reflected the emerging concerns of a modernized liberalism, being the terms on which the left and center left would reshape the political priorities of the Democratic Party in the decades after the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Specifically, it described a liberalism that acknowledged the central place of race in shaping the nation and foregrounded the consequences of racial discrimination (including poverty) for democratic society. In those terms, it understood the importance of the cities for determining America's fate, and addressed an urban nation in which cultural cohesion and economic management would be key to progress. The Kerner report did not by itself reimagine liberalism, of course, but it offers a critical illustration of how centrists sought to reestablish their claim to leadership.

The work here is, consequently, less interested in the debates within the commission over its policy recommendations than in the story the commission told; less in the disagreements within a slow-to-align group, more in the philosophy around which they broadly converged. In each case, the commission's narratives positioned racial inequality as the central obstacle to national progress and presented liberalism as essential to the realization of black aspirations and the fulfillment of American democracy. All of this, it conceived within the terms of an American national community. Or at least,

these were the stated ambitions of the Kerner report. How convincing was its attempt to retell America's story?

### The voice of the power elite

The first thing to acknowledge about the Kerner report is that it was written without the active involvement of ghetto communities themselves, and from a lofty social vantage point, by a class of people C. Wright Mills once characterized as America's "power elite."<sup>23</sup> Or, as Tom Wicker put it, in his introduction to the Bantam Books paperback edition that did so much to frame the report for a mass readership, the commission was the embodiment of "the Establishment." That is to say, it represented the postwar, Fair Deal, liberal order. Its membership included the institutional representatives of the social interests that carried weight in Sixties America.

There, represented on the commission, was the progressive face of business (Katherine Graham Peden, Kentucky's Commissioner of Commerce), and the socially conservative voice of corporate America, speaking for the politics of what the New Left would come to call "corporate liberalism" (Charles B. Thornton of Litton Industries).<sup>24</sup> There was institutional labor (I. W. Abel of the United Steel Workers) and the Civil Rights movement's moderate wing (Roy Wilkins of the NAACP). There was a city police chief and city mayor, both progressive examples of urban leadership (Chief Herbert Jenkins from Atlanta and John Lindsay, the Republican Mayor of New York). And in the bi-partisan spirit of balance and consensus that Mills identified as a characteristic of the power elite, the commission included Republicans and Democrats (Representative William M. McCulloch from Ohio and Senator Edward Brooke from Massachusetts; Representative James Corman from California and Senator Fred R. Harris from Oklahoma). Then there was the chairman, Otto Kerner, a Democratic machine politician.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, David Ginsburg and Victor Palmieri provided executive-management oversight, to keep the inquiry within bounds. Those latter two men were, the social scientists who worked in the research team later recalled, cut from the same cloth – "Kennedy-style role models," as one commission researcher, Gary T. Marx, put it.<sup>26</sup> They guided the writing of the final draft, and their expertise in the art of compromise secured the agreement of all members of the commission.

Given the report was written about communities that were distinctly disempowered, the commission's perspective was inevitably that of the outsider, peering into the ghetto with shocked surprise. As one staffer explained to *Life* magazine, the report "isn't for black Americans", who already "know how it is." Rather, "It's for white Americans, who don't know."<sup>27</sup> Wicker was in that context an obvious choice to write the introduction to the Bantam edition. He had headed the Washington bureau of



*The New York Times* since 1964, witnessing the major political developments of the era unfold close at hand. And as well as being an authority on national politics, he was also in tune with the liberal sensibility of the time. His own liberalism, shaped through his experience and perspective as a white Southerner, drew him to support the cause of civil rights and civil liberties. Like many liberals, he approved of LBJ's early success in civil rights and Great Society reform, but grew increasingly critical over Vietnam, particularly as he came to believe the war was devouring federal tax dollars that could otherwise be spent on social programs and in pursuit of racial equality.<sup>28</sup> He was able to serve a crucial function in mediating both Washington and black America for a broader public of white readers, worlds that were typically unfamiliar to them. And he was well placed to address liberals of both moderate and radical dispositions. He offered radicalism packaged for moderates, but at the same time moderation packaged for radicals. Interpreting the Kerner report, Wicker threw emphasis back upon the authors, as much as their findings, and the moderate Americans who constituted their presumed readership. But as he did so, he implicitly encompassed both moderation and radicalism within the same liberal idea. As much as encouraging moderates to accept radical findings, he offered an implicit reassurance to liberal readers whose frustrations with the Johnson administration were prompting them to look leftward. Liberals, in other words, like Wicker himself. For such liberals, Wicker offered hope that the Establishment was capable of democratic regeneration, and that racial justice could be achieved by reform within the framework of national institutional politics.

For Wicker, the commission's social status was of value. He suggested it could confer respectability on ideas the report's presumed readers would normally (and presumably negatively) associate with Civil Rights and Black Power activists, or "such white radicals as Tom Hayden or such fiery evangelists as James Baldwin."<sup>29</sup> The Kerner report could give credibility to the left's critique in the eyes of precisely the white, politically moderate readership upon whose shoulders, he argued, the moral burden for change lay. As Wicker observed, the unsettling message of the Kerner report was that those white people, who thought themselves responsible, upstanding citizens, were personally implicated in racial inequality. The report showed that the riots had been borne of unemployment, educational deprivation, and poverty, but above all, he wrote, an "insidious and pervasive white sense of the inferiority of black men." This, he suggested, was the truth of the "sheer humanness of racism," of its personal as well as structural qualities.<sup>30</sup> And so, the task of redeeming the "violated faith" of democracy tainted by racism fell to "white moderate, responsible America" because this "is where the trouble lies."<sup>31</sup> The admission of this fact was a necessary one, Wicker concluded. And to his mind, it was the "representatives of that white,

moderate, responsible America that, alone, needed to say it,” to validate it for a readership of white Americans whose presumed political sensibilities inclined them to the preservation of existing institutions within the national order of postwar liberalism.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, liberal moderation, in this respect, meant the centrist politics of negotiation, compromise, and accommodation between conservative and liberal opinion within the auspices of the postwar political economy. For liberals, it meant democratic leadership in government and other institutions, in collaboration with private, corporate business. It meant setting the social and economic priorities for national development. This was in essence what Schlesinger had seen as the “vital” force of liberalism in America’s democratic society. One key test of the Kerner report’s response to the long, hot summers, then, was whether it could imagine a way of uniting the various forces represented on the commission behind such liberalism. And in that respect, it was largely successful. In finalizing the report, David Ginsburg secured the approval of all the commissioners. The Kerner report formally embodied a consensus. This was not a foregone conclusion. As Gillon showed, Ginsburg struggled to reconcile the competing and at times quite polarized factions within the commission, as Lindsay emphasized the role of poverty and discrimination, and Thornton stressed the need for law enforcement.<sup>33</sup> But then again, Ginsburg was able to find a consensus because there was considerable common ground within the Establishment. Thornton was known as a conservative, but he operated within the terms of liberal national leadership. Thus, for example, as chair of the commission’s advisory panel on private enterprise, he delivered a supplementary report that epitomized the liberal, Great Society approach in its emphasis on partnership between government and the private sector in job creation – in fact, in his report, Thornton was able to cite a recent speech by LBJ, encouraging just such an approach.<sup>34</sup> There were policy disagreements, but the commission fundamentally operated under the assumptions of the liberal system.

For that reason, the Kerner report could not satisfy those who wished to give more emphasis to the voices of people not represented by big business or the institutions of government – black ghetto communities included. For example, the journalist Andrew Kopkind believed the commission’s internal disagreements canceled each other out in its centrist way. The debate settled on a “middle position” of liberal consensus, the lowest common denominator.<sup>35</sup> This had been inevitable, he thought. Liberal assumptions guided everything from the selection of the commissioners, to the recruitment of staff and consultants, to the decision to write for a moderate readership.<sup>36</sup> All along, the commission “assum[ed] the [continued] dominance of the same elites now in power,” he argued, and so it only asked questions that could be answered with policies compatible with existing

institutional arrangements.<sup>37</sup> In effect, this assumed national government would work alongside private, corporate business. This was the political economy of the Cold War, of the military-industrial complex, and in the era of the Vietnam War especially, for Kopkind, this fact ensured the Kerner commission was morally compromised. In his eyes, nothing was more suspect than the fact the commission's liberalism could appeal to a corporate businessman like Charles Thornton, whose Litton Industries "runs Job Corps camps in the same way it builds war machines," Kopkind wrote. Which is to say, it offered training based on the principles of scalable mass production in return for profitable government contracts, much as it profited from war contracts to supply the military.<sup>38</sup>

Could the Kerner report have been anything else? Kopkind was in contrast more impressed by what he discovered in a draft commission report that a group of researchers had written in November 1967, *Harvest of American Racism*.<sup>39</sup> As David Boesel, one of its authors, later recalled, the work provided an exhilarating opportunity to relate real-world events to the ideas that had shaped his political consciousness as he found in the ghetto riots the essence of rebellion: the defiance of power that Albert Camus had described.<sup>40</sup> On balance, *Harvest* was a measured work of social science that carefully categorized riots and rioters, but its final chapter, "America on the Brink," proposed "the political incorporation of militant Negro youth into American life" – in effect, giving an institutional voice to activists, taking power out of the hands of existing institutions, and investing it in local communities.<sup>41</sup> While imaginative and ambitious, such a policy was obviously fraught with political risk and practical difficulty, and it found no favor with Ginsburg and Palmieri – the men who were, as *Harvest* coauthor David O. Sears later expressed it, "LBJ's political guardians."<sup>42</sup> Ostensibly, it had more in common with the political ferment that produced Harold Cruse's seminal work of Black Power thought, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* in 1967 than with the liberalism of LBJ.<sup>43</sup>

Arguably, in principle, *Harvest* did only what Wicker would later do in his introduction to the Kerner report by testing the limits of liberalism, in this case by seeking to reconcile it with the radical ideas that were coursing through the left at the time. Just as the ideas that had inspired *Harvest* pointed outward, for some, toward self-consciously revolutionary movements, they prompted others, like Boesel, to turn their gaze critically back upon liberalism. And rather than an out-of-hand rejection of liberalism, *Harvest* can be understood as an attempt to stretch it beyond its bounds. The difference between *Harvest* and Wicker's introduction, however, is that Wicker envisaged the renewal of liberalism within the existing framework of nationalism and corporate capitalism, whereas *Harvest* proposed a potentially more far-reaching structural reorganization of democracy. Ginsburg and Palmieri, reportedly "furious," dragged the authors into

“stormy” meetings to account for their work.<sup>44</sup> It appeared there was a firm limit to what could be said in a document penned by “the Establishment,” and in the end, the manuscript was boxed up and packed away, along with the radical spirit that had animated it.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, the ideas that would structure the Kerner report would be those of a liberalism that conceived democratic citizenship within the framework of nation and the market economy.

The Kerner commission’s stated purpose was to explain what happened, why it happened, and what could be done to prevent it from happening again, but it should also be understood in practice as an attempt to set the terms of debate, to rationalize the project of national civil rights and welfare reform, and to assert liberal control over its pace and direction.<sup>46</sup> Its purpose, unstated, was not to resolve the problems associated with the long, hot summers at any cost, but to reconcile the goal of racial equality with the political economy of corporate capitalism and existing institutional centers of power. The following sections consider how far, within those bounds, the Kerner commission could imagine a racially integrated national community.

### **History, race, and nation**

In an important respect, in making the case for liberal leadership, the Kerner commission sought to establish a national story, a shared understanding of the past. Gunnar Myrdal’s study had been cognizant of the legacy of slavery and the plantation system of labor, but the Kerner report asserted even more explicitly that racism should be understood historically, and it implied that a lack of a shared understanding of its central place in the national story was a cause of social division in the present.<sup>47</sup> “Most Americans,” by which it meant most white Americans, “know little of the origins of the racial schism” dividing their nation, it claimed. “Few appreciate” the centrality of what it described as “the problem of the Negro” in American society. “Fewer still” understand how discrimination had excluded black people from “the mainstream of American life.” And “Only a handful” realize that protest against racial discrimination had been a constant through the ages.<sup>48</sup> If there was a general awareness of slavery and discrimination, it suggested, white people tended to conceive this within a narrative of progress that did not acknowledge the legacy of racism. “By 1967,” it argued, “whites could point to the demise of slavery,” and “civil rights legislation,” and could interpret “the growing size of the Negro middle class” as signs of progress. Nevertheless, it continued, “Negroes could point to the doctrine of white supremacy,” and the fact that in “their long fight for full citizenship, [. . .] they had active opposition from most of the white population.”<sup>49</sup> There were, in short, two contrasting national narratives at play. Accordingly, the

Kerner report's historical narrative developed its core theme, the need for liberal national leadership that could realize the "true union" of "the single society" – in contrast to the prospect of a permanent separation into "two societies."<sup>50</sup>

Actually, anyone interested in learning about black history in 1968 could have done worse than turn to John Hope Franklin's landmark book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, by then twenty years old and in its third edition.<sup>51</sup> Or they could have consulted the more recent work of Elliott M. Rudwick and August Meier, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, for example.<sup>52</sup> But part of the problem, as the Kerner report suggested, was that most (white) Americans did not give the history of racial inequality a second thought, and so would not have gone looking to begin with. Significantly, then, the commission recruited all three scholars, Franklin, Rudwick, and Meier, as consultants to write a history chapter, "Rejection and Protest." The themes of their work run through the report's historical narrative. It had something of Franklin's genius for storytelling, beginning in 1619 with the arrival of the first African slaves at Jamestown, running through the Revolution, the Civil War, and the major events of the twentieth century, down to the Civil Rights Era, in a little under thirty pages. Essentially, it retold the national story as a struggle for freedom and the equal rights of citizenship.<sup>53</sup> And it reflected the social and political themes of the work of Rudwick and Meier, in documenting the role of violence in mediating race relations in the past, in its emphasis on the importance of the ghetto as the arena in which black freedom would be decided in the modern era, and in charting the interplay of competing ideas of separatism and integration in shaping the long struggle for equality.<sup>54</sup> To that extent, the Kerner report did a valuable service in bringing black history to a new readership and explaining the meaning of its legacy for the nation's predicament.

Still, history was put to political purposes here. Consider that while Franklin's book had reached back to the African past, the Kerner report's narrative concerned itself only with the black experience in America. This had a particular resonance at a time, in 1968, when the Black Power idea was beginning to reshape the terms of the public debate over race and democracy. It allowed the report to judge Black Power without considering the broader global context of anti-colonialism, and the question of whether racism at home had a relationship to the exercise of U.S. power internationally. This meant, among other things, no debating the meaning of the Vietnam War – and certainly no contemplating the sort of ideas Stokely Carmichael had expressed during his visit to Hanoi in 1967, for example, when he insisted there was a "close militant solidarity of black people in the United States with the Vietnamese people in the struggle against the common enemy, U.S. imperialism."<sup>55</sup> And so, where Black Power pointed outward from the United States to a black diaspora, the Kerner report offered

a story of the struggle for citizenship within a single nation. It rhetorically contained black democratic aspirations within the borders of the United States and established the rights of American citizenship as the only meaningful measure of freedom.

Clipping out the wider vistas of black history in this way served the report's central political argument. Black Power developed in astonishingly diverse directions during the 1960s and 1970s. It took on a sometimes revolutionary, sometimes reformist and liberal, and sometimes conservative bearing, with a scope that could be at once civic, national, and international, and encompass varieties of economic, democratic, and cultural activism.<sup>56</sup> But the Kerner report judged Black Power simply as a retreat from the historical struggle for "acceptance" into the national mainstream in the face of white "rejection." In acceding to "rejection," it argued, Black Power "unconsciously function[ed] as an accommodation to white racism."<sup>57</sup> In *Where Do We Go From Here?*, Martin Luther King, Jr, had also, in part, critically explained Black Power as a reaction to the white backlash, and as an expression of frustration at the slow pace of tangible change after the promise of the Civil Rights Act and the Great Society. But at the same time, he insisted Black Power could not be understood without an appreciation of the disillusionment and moral outrage the Vietnam War had caused.<sup>58</sup> Yet in contrast, the Kerner report defined Black Power reductively as a response to "rejection" and the white backlash, to fit its basic premise.

Nevertheless, the purpose of the Kerner report's historical narrative was not simply to diminish the influence of the Black Power movement. Rather, it sought to persuade a presumed readership of white moderates of the urgency of national action under liberal leadership. Whereas the rhetoric of Black Power often invoked revolution, the Kerner report argued that the movement actually represented a return to an older, more defensive tradition of self-help, race pride, and separatism. Recalling Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, or W.E.B. Du Bois's interest in Pan-Africanism, it was "old wine in new bottles."<sup>59</sup> If Black Power seemed to express an angry mood, it suggested, it was not because the Civil Rights Movement was becoming increasingly trenchant in its demands. Rather, the report argued, Black Power was the voice of political disillusionment, the consequence of a wider social failure to achieve progress toward racial equality within the national community – "acceptance," in its terms. Civil Rights protest, the Kerner report insisted, was actually "firmly rooted in the basic values of American society, seeking not their destruction but their fulfillment."<sup>60</sup> And so, the emergence of Black Power was to be understood in that light as the measure of the nation's failure to honor those values. In short, the historical narrative pointed to the need for a national campaign of liberal reform.

In effect, therefore, the Kerner report adapted black historiography to put a new complexion on the national story. In the Kerner report, American history appeared as an account of opportunities missed, of a nation struggling to fulfil its own ambition because of racism. The “sins of caste,” as the Kerner report described it, invoking the language of nineteenth-century abolitionists, ran down through the Revolution, which failed to end slavery, and through the Civil War and Reconstruction, where racial segregation stifled black freedom after legal emancipation.<sup>61</sup> The problem, it suggested, was a lack of resolve in national government. For example, the national government had passed a Civil Rights Act in 1875 without any effective enforcement provisions – and it saw even that meager law struck down by the Supreme Court within ten years. The national government failed to prevent segregation, lynching, and murderous “race riots” from patterning American life, especially in the South, but also in the North. And all the while, it tolerated discrimination in housing, education, and employment across the United States.<sup>62</sup> Legal cases and protest movements openly challenged discrimination, but despite Supreme Court victories, segregation persisted in violation of the law – and the Kerner report ascribed the turn toward direct action during the Civil Rights Era as a consequence of that failure. At the same time, it argued, there was a limit to what direct action could achieve on its own.<sup>63</sup> Having established the historical need for a resolution to racial inequality, then, the report brought matters back to its central theme: the problems confronting black Americans in 1968, of schooling, slum housing, and police brutality, it concluded, were of a complexity and magnitude that demanded national government intervention, under liberal leadership.<sup>64</sup>

The Kerner report’s historical narrative sought to promote the idea of an inclusive national community primarily for a white readership. It did not engage meaningfully with the currents of internationalism associated with Black Power, instead imagining the United States as the central stage upon which black freedom was to be determined, and citizenship as the means by which it would be achieved. This was a significant omission at a time when Black Power encouraged communities to see connections between their own struggles and anti-colonial movements around the world, to sympathize in that context with the Vietnamese fighters resisting U.S. power. But the Kerner commission did not set out to empower black communities to help themselves as such, rather its liberalism was concerned with opening access to the wealth and opportunities white people had long exclusively enjoyed. It left unasked the question of whether those communities wanted such a thing. Nevertheless, it was more narrowly successful in its own terms, at least to the extent that it offered a public reappraisal of the nation’s democratic shortcomings by positioning race as a central part of the

American story. As the next section shows, much the same could be said of the report's treatment of the ghetto.

### Ghetto and nation

Building on its historical narrative, in three powerfully affecting chapters describing in shocking detail the desperate conditions of life in black ghetto communities, the Kerner report confronted its readers with the consequences of racism in the present. These were the pages that gave substance to the report's claim that America was becoming two separate and unequal societies. They were crucial chapters. Yet, at the same time, they stripped the ghetto of its political context. They took no account of the demands militant activists were advancing in those communities. They instead painted the ghetto as a place of social, psychological, and moral degradation, not so much part of the nation as a distortion of it, a place of broken people rather than disadvantaged citizens. They explained how the government might integrate ghetto communities into the national mainstream, as the white middle class understood it, but they did not explain how those communities might contribute to the shaping of their own destiny.

The Kerner report's interpretation of the ghetto was important because it documented what was for most white, middle-class Americans a largely unknown world. Perhaps it is more accurate to say it was a disavowed world, for as Kenneth B. Clark wrote in 1965, "The privileged white community is at great pains to blind itself to the conditions of the ghetto."<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the facts of urban segregation and their social cost had long been available for those willing to go looking. By the time of the Kerner commission, E. Franklin Frazier's well-known sociological study of the ghetto and its origins, *The Negro Family*, was almost thirty years old; *Black Metropolis*, the celebrated study of Chicago by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr, was over twenty years old.<sup>66</sup> More recently, Kenneth Clark's study of New York, *Dark Ghetto*, had appeared in 1965, the same year Daniel Patrick Moynihan completed his major national study, *The Negro Family* – its title nodding to Frazier's influential work.<sup>67</sup> Even so, Harry McPherson, one of LBJ's closest advisors, professed ignorance, and claimed the Watts uprising in Los Angeles in 1965 had come as a huge surprise to the administration precisely because they had no real consciousness of urban segregation, beyond Harlem ("You think of the South and Harlem almost as being the same").<sup>68</sup> The Kerner report had an important role in exploding the open secret of the ghetto's place in American life.

And yet, there was a confusion at the heart of the Kerner report's narrative. It operated in two distinct explanatory modes, and these had quite divergent implications. One mode was the investigative, "muckraking" tradition of socially engaged, public-interest journalism, and this was



something the Bantam edition explicitly evoked in its promotional back-cover copy in promising readers “the facts behind the shame of our cities” – *The Shame of the Cities* being the title of Lincoln Steffens’s celebrated exposé of civic corruption, published in 1904.<sup>69</sup> In this muckraking mode, the Kerner commission conceived the summer civil unrest as the consequence of an institutional failure “of all levels of government – federal and state as well as local.”<sup>70</sup> This first mode of social investigation sought to alert the reader to the republic’s institutional and democratic shortcomings. The remedies it implied would therefore be structural social reforms, improving government responsiveness, and strengthening social solidarity. Meanwhile, a second mode drew on psychology, sociology, and particularly theories about poverty, childhood development, and culture, to explain the inner life of those ghetto communities. This second mode of explanation claimed the authority of social science, although at the same time, it was rooted in normative middle-class values. Thus, the commission concluded, it was with “an ingrained cynicism about society and its institutions” that ghetto residents turned away from work and marriage, and the life of the middle-class “solid citizen.” Instead, “exploitation and the ‘hustle’” was “a way of life” for them. Theirs was “a culture of poverty” in an “environmental jungle.”<sup>71</sup> Crucially, while the commission presented the problems as the consequence of institutional failure, the report conceived the communities themselves as incapable of remedying the situation.

That said, the Kerner report’s language very closely followed Clark (who wrote of the ghetto as “institutionalized pathology”) and Moynihan (who wrote of its “tangle of pathology”), and Frazier before them (whose work Moynihan quoted directly).<sup>72</sup> It was not alone in adopting what was a widely held view of poverty. By way of illustration, Martin Luther King, Jr, spoke of the ghetto in similarly mixed terms when he appeared as an expert witness before the Kerner commission in October 1967. He condemned institutional failure, called the ghetto the embodiment of “a vicious system of [. . .] white society.” It was a place where legal protection did not extend to employment, education, building codes, welfare, and basic civic services, he said. At the same time, he suggested, this created distorted values, and his words blurred into a discourse of morality. Youths “waste their barren lives standing on street corners,” he said, while entire communities suffer “soul-sapping inactivity and poverty.”<sup>73</sup> The social corruption of the ghetto was “poisoning the young.” So, the ghetto uprisings were crimes, he admitted – albeit, “derivative crimes [. . .] born of the greater crimes of white society.” And, those crimes should be understood as the expression of the moral “darkness” of the ghetto, he argued. For, he declared, quoting Victor Hugo, “If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed.”<sup>74</sup> The burden of responsibility for that moral “darkness” lay with the “vicious system,” but he spoke of the ghetto as a place of morally “poisoned” people all the same.

It was, indeed, a matter of received wisdom among liberals that discrimination and poverty caused riots, and this shaped the public debate quite decisively during the long, hot summers. Consider that when LBJ announced the creation of the Kerner commission in his July 27, 1967, television broadcast, for example, he anticipated its findings by presuming “All of us know,” that “ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs” were “conditions that breed despair and violence.”<sup>75</sup> By then, this had long been the Democratic Party’s line on civil unrest, dating back to 1964 and the first summer of riot and revolt in Harlem.<sup>76</sup> It was the view that had shaped the findings of the McCone commission Governor Pat Brown of California established following the Watts uprising of 1965.<sup>77</sup> And it was the tenor of press coverage throughout the period.<sup>78</sup> But it was a stigmatizing view, not readily compatible with the rhetoric of citizenship.

Yet, this interpretation starkly contrasted with the findings of the Kerner research team. For David Boesel, the field reports coming in from the cities confirmed his belief that the “young rioters” were not souls left in darkness, but “a rising, self-conscious political class.”<sup>79</sup> Fred R. Harris and John Lindsay saw for themselves something of that spirit when they made city visits during the Kerner investigation. Unfortunately, the process of negotiating the final draft of the report squeezed out the opportunity for them to offer reflections on those experiences. Nevertheless, when Harris later published a personal view on the long, hot summers, *Alarms and Hopes*, he gave an account of one memorable meeting in a basement in Cincinnati, Ohio, in September 1967, where he found a circle of educated and thoughtful activists.<sup>80</sup> They offered a challenging rejection of his national idealism: “We not only don’t think you really believe in what you say America stands for,” Harris later recalled being told, and “we don’t think you ever believed it.” That they had turned away from the politics of integration was evident in their words, and also in the way some of them dressed. There were “conscious revolts against the middle-class standards of white America” Harris wrote, in the appearance of one activist, “wearing an African-design, buttonless shirt, a carved African amulet around his neck and Afro-style hair,” for example.<sup>81</sup> If Harris did not accept the Black Power analysis of America, he sympathized. He saw obvious appeal in a movement that responded to racism with the affirmation that black was “beautiful and strong and good.”<sup>82</sup>

Still, for Harris, Black Power was a measure of the failure of national inclusion. “Negro Americans are Americans,” he insisted, and the nature of the problem lay in the fact that “they know that by American standards they are not doing very well.”<sup>83</sup> But while he sympathized with the militant challenge to liberalism, and his book remained hopeful of addressing the democratic demands of ghetto activists, the Kerner report remained more limited in its political imagination. Even as the Kerner report invoked the

idea of “true union” of the “single society,” it implied the people left outside the mainstream were pathologically volatile, and a turbulent danger to the nation rather than, more simply, a disadvantaged class of citizens deprived of equal rights and with a legitimate democratic voice. The Kerner report was therefore more successful as an attempt to awaken the conscience of moderate readers than to explain the political mood of the ghetto. Instead of the sort of dialogue Harris had sought out, the Kerner report relied on old tropes and a more abstract, theoretical understanding of ghetto communities. Perhaps there was some value in its account of the ghetto, all the same. In limited terms, it was successful in challenging what it saw as a national disavowal of the ghetto. At the very least, it brought into public life a level of awareness that had previously been lacking. Perhaps more importantly, though, it presented the ghetto as a central problem for American democracy, and an issue essential to the liberal understanding of the nation. The next section explains how the commission developed this theme as it projected forward, into the urban future.

### **The future nation**

Having first shown its readers how the history of racial discrimination culminated in the desperation of the ghetto, the Kerner report then looked into “The Future of the Cities.” Observing social trends in American life, and anticipating their consequences, the Kerner report argued that only integration would bring about racial equality, and this could be achieved only through effective national management of the cities and urban development. In these terms, liberal expertise would be essential to the specific objective of securing racial equality, both to end the cycle of civil unrest, and to safeguard democratic values and hence the integrity of what it defined as the American national purpose. And as it presented liberalism as the indispensable, inevitable framework for realizing racial justice, so it presented alternative approaches as harmful to that cause.

In particular, it sought to counter the Black Power Movement’s emerging analysis of liberalism. It did so not by presenting Black Power as a radical threat to democracy, as conservatives more typically responded to the movement. Rather, it cast it as symptomatic of a deeper social malaise, of racism. Where Maryland’s Governor Spiro Agnew came to national prominence notoriously by denouncing leading Black Power spokesman H. Rap Brown as a danger to law and order, a “professional agitator” who incited riots, for example, the Kerner commission offered an alternative perspective on the political movement to which he belonged.<sup>84</sup> It implicitly accepted the logical outcome of racism would be a society much like the America Black Power activists described: a society in which democracy was a sham and white supremacist order was upheld by something akin to colonial

domination. But at the same time, it insisted that America had not yet reached that point of rupture. The Kerner report insisted there was still time to prevent a future in which the nation would be permanently divided into mutually hostile camps, and democracy could be saved. Liberalism, it argued, was still capable of democratic renewal. This was the story it told.

Firstly, it is worth acknowledging that in framing its analysis of the problem, the commission turned to someone whose work was emblematic of the liberal, centrist, institutional orthodoxy of the day: Anthony Downs, an economist and senior analyst for the RAND Corporation who had come to Victor Palmieri's attention while serving on LBJ's National Commission on Urban Problems in 1967.<sup>85</sup> For Kopkind, the influence of Downs was fatal to any hope the commission might look beyond the confines of liberal thinking. Downs's work, Kopkind wrote disapprovingly, was based on a method of systems analysis, originally developed in the Department of Defense and now being applied to social problems in the cities. It presumed, in its centrist liberal way, partnership between the private sector and government in pursuit of national objectives.<sup>86</sup> The only future the Kerner commission could deem acceptable, Kopkind argued, would be one compatible with that liberal approach to national strategy.

Thus, drawing on Downs's work, the Kerner report proposed three choices: to hold current course, accepting a growing poverty and segregation; to "gild the ghetto" through a policy of "enrichment" while accepting racial separation; or to pursue integration.<sup>87</sup> Within that framework, the report offered corresponding narratives of the speculative future: the first two choices would result in a divided people turning against each other in worsening cycles of violence; the third would create an inclusive national community, grounded in a racially integrated urban society. It was not an even-handed evaluation of equivalents, then, but the rationalization of a presumption that full participation in the existing corporate economy would result in equality. By imagining the future of the cities, the Kerner commission described how, in those terms, working pragmatically within the existing institutional and economic order, liberals could provide leadership to bring about an inclusive national community.

To the extent that this represented liberalism's pragmatic bent, the commission's liberals could be described as pragmatists. As Gillon characterized it, the Kerner report favored pragmatic programs to improve education, housing, and employment, and this approach prevailed over the more idealistic democratic vision described in *The Harvest of American Racism*.<sup>88</sup> Still, it is important to recognize that the Kerner liberals had their own idealistic streak. They did not favor devolving institutional power down to local communities, but envisaged a national democracy in which liberal leadership would bring institutions into alignment behind a commitment to racial integration. Or in other words, the Kerner report allied liberal

pragmatism and a democratic national vision within the existing political economy – arguing that by reforming the cities, Americans would not merely improve the quality of life in measurable ways, but in doing so would realize a national community true to the republic’s highest ideals.

Thus, the Kerner report argued the nation’s predicament of civil unrest was linked to what it defined sweepingly as “the accelerating segregation of low-income, disadvantaged Negroes within the ghettos of the largest American cities.”<sup>89</sup> What the Kerner commission meant by the “largest” cities was more specifically those cities with growing black communities, on the way to becoming majorities. Washington, DC, and Newark, New Jersey, were already black-majority cities. Looking at trends, the commission concluded that by 1980 they would be joined by New Orleans, Louisiana; Richmond, Virginia; Jackson, Mississippi; Cleveland, Ohio; St Louis, Missouri; Detroit, Michigan; and by 1985, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Oakland, California, and Chicago, Illinois.<sup>90</sup> On current course, the future of those cities looked bleak, the commission argued, because racial discrimination was cutting black people off from opportunity in a changing urban economy. In many large cities, the Kerner report noted, new office buildings were being built in downtown districts, heralding the arrival of new, white-collar professional jobs. But even though those buildings were often located near black neighborhoods, the jobs were typically taken by educated, white commuters. Meanwhile, the manufacturing and retail jobs that black communities had relied upon were moving out of the inner city. The question the Kerner report was attempting to answer was how to avoid a situation where black people became isolated and immiserated residential majorities, trapped in densely populated, low-income ghettos. What was at stake, what urban management would have to resolve, was the prospect of an enduring national division.<sup>91</sup>

Evidence gathered in the course of the commission’s work had indeed shown the scale of the problem, nationally. The picture of city life the Kerner commission’s researchers described in their field reports was one of frustration for black communities. They found considerable evidence that progress in the Great Society was being slowed or halted by unresponsive or intransigent local civic institutions.<sup>92</sup> This was indeed what the field research teams of the Kerner commission found in different ways in cities both governed by Republicans (Cincinnati, Ohio, and Plainfield, New Jersey) and Democrats (Newark, New Jersey).<sup>93</sup> Even in Detroit, where Mayor Jerome Cavanagh had striven to build a “model city,” the Kerner field researchers spoke of uncooperative and unresponsive middle officials and administrators in a city sharply segregated.<sup>94</sup> In the South, researchers heard of civic institutions remaining effectively closed to black communities in Nashville, Tennessee, and Jackson, Mississippi, for example.<sup>95</sup> And things were not dramatically better even in Atlanta, a city that had taken federal

funds while neglecting the long-term unemployed and so skewing resources away from the poorest black communities.<sup>96</sup> Houston's record also contradicted its progressive reputation.<sup>97</sup>

Of course, it was possible to argue this implied a need for a radical redistribution of power to local communities, to allow them to influence events. For radicals of this opinion, the rhetoric of anti-colonialism offered a contrast to liberal ideals of national cohesion. Indeed, this had been the tenor of the *Harvest* draft report. As David Boesel later explained, he and fellow researcher Lou Goldberg equated the summer uprisings with "anti-colonial rebellions in Africa and Asia."<sup>98</sup> It was an interpretation attuned to a radical moment, as Black Power activists invoked the idea of colonialism to advocate local community control. Here was something close to the sentiments Fred Harris and John Lindsay heard in the Cincinnati basement, for example. And it echoed the words of Stokely Carmichael as he spoke of "rebellions" in the cities, "linked with the struggle of the third world," and whose book, *Black Power*, co-written with Charles V. Hamilton in 1967, developed the political idea of the ghetto-colony.<sup>99</sup> "Anti-colonialism" in this sense rejected the politics of national reform and racial integration. Thus, to demand the overthrow of colonial rule was to aspire to locally elected candidates, local control of schools, and the overhaul of federal welfare (or "welfare colonialism").<sup>100</sup>

In that context, it was significant that in its interpretation of the future of the cities the Kerner report inverted the anti-colonial critique of nationalism. To accept growing social division, it argued, including to abandon hope of national inclusion by embracing the radical pluralism of Black Power, was to risk further violence. Echoing the words of *Harvest*, but presenting liberal integration as its alternative, the Kerner report conjured the prospect of a future in which social division, whether white prejudice or black separatism, would lead to "the separation of the two communities in a garrison state," or "a kind of urban *apartheid* with semi-martial law."<sup>101</sup> Even without such violence, though, to accept permanent racial division would be to accept "a conclusive repudiation of the traditional American ideals of individual dignity, freedom, and equality of opportunity."<sup>102</sup>

What was more significant about this interpretation, however, was that it described an evolving liberal idea of the nation and understanding of race. Thus, it assumed racial inequality was a national problem, not a peculiarity of the South. That is, in recognizing that the cities were where the problems of racial inequality and discrimination were most apparent and significant, it conceived racism as a matter of modern urban management and therefore inseparable from national economic development; racism was not simply to be understood as a legacy of the Old South, but a problem of the metropolitan centers too. As Tom Wicker argued, it presented a national readership of white people who thought themselves reasonable with the troubling

implications of racial inequality, and at the same time it could speak to liberalism's left by incorporating the problems of the ghetto into an overall understanding of racism. In short, in drawing attention to the cities, the upheavals of the long, hot summers had exposed how deeply racism was implicated in American society. The Kerner report proposed ways of engineering it out, using technical expertise under liberal direction. It found a new purpose for liberal national stewardship, in proposing to guide American development within the terms of the corporate economy, and under those auspices, to secure racial equality.

## Conclusion

The Kerner report was a policy failure, but as an exercise in rhetoric, it was highly effective in reaching a wide readership at a moment when liberalism was at a crossroads, and it left a deep imprint on American national consciousness. Published as a mass-market paperback, the Kerner report found its way into millions of homes, and it has had a long-lasting cultural legacy, influencing the way in which Americans (and white liberals in particular) have conceived the democratic dangers of racial inequality and urban poverty for half a century. Politically, as this article has noted, it was a somewhat narrowly drawn document. Under David Ginsburg's oversight, the commission set out to address a presumed readership of white moderates, largely conceived as a group who supported the goals of the Great Society as far as it strengthened the liberal order of postwar America and the idea of a cohesive national community. But at the same time, in addressing the problems of the inner city, its findings did much to affirm a broadening public understanding of racism, a more rounded appreciation of its systemic nature and of its historical roots. In that respect, the Kerner report should be judged a success. It offered a broadly consistent synthesis of liberal thinking in a set of narratives, drawing connections between the historical legacy of racism, the social problems of the present, and the direction of liberal urban policy. As Tom Wicker's introduction to the Bantam edition made clear, it was a story that could encompass the Establishment, moderate centrists, and liberalism's left, and it cleared the air with a bold statement, in the form of a government report that could carry respectability and authority, acknowledging the scale of racism in America. While it did not change the course of LBJ's presidency, it made a powerful public declaration recognizing the acceptance of the Civil Rights Movement's democratic demands into the mainstream of national life, defining a new political centerground in the process.

That said, while it functioned rhetorically, the report's story of American national cohesion undoubtedly lacked authenticity. The commission membership encompassed the "power elite" of the Establishment, and although

Tom Wicker argued this gave its findings authority, its findings were also, in truth, too distant from the social reality of ghetto life and its political disposition, and that distance was telling. Despite the efforts of Fred R. Harris and John Lindsay to find out for themselves, the commission's executive managers tightly limited the opportunity for ghetto voices to be heard in the final report. It relied too much on institutional expertise and the judgments of people remote from ghetto life. This was a weakness that a more meaningful engagement with the activist left might have helped remedy, but while those views shaped the commission's draft report, *Harvest*, they were ultimately suppressed. It would have been a better Kerner report had it taken militant opinion more seriously, especially to acknowledge the legitimate democratic voices of ghetto communities. Harris's subsequently published book, *Alarms and Hopes*, came closer to doing precisely that.

While the report did not quite live up to the possibilities the commission's work had actually tended to suggest, it marked an important transitional moment for liberalism. Its cultural impact was substantial. Its ideal of national cohesion was nostalgically recalled long after its policy recommendations were forgotten. Importantly, it grasped the issues that would continue to shape liberal priorities. In the years to come, liberals would continue to make the case for their national leadership by insisting that race has been a central force shaping society, by confronting the implications of urban segregation, and by recognizing racial justice as a critical test of American democracy. The Kerner report was historically significant in that context, in contributing to the construction of a national narrative, rooted in the American democratic idealism familiar from the older liberal tradition, but reaching toward a new understanding of the meaning of racial diversity within those terms.

What can be said in conclusion, then, is that in its reinterpretation of American history, its insistence on confronting uncomfortable truths, and its attempt to chart a course into the future, the Kerner report demonstrated how a moderate, centrist, establishment liberalism could contribute to a reimagining of the national community and national priorities in the age beyond the Civil Rights Era. It set out to shatter what it framed as a cultural complacency in a widespread, national disavowal of the true extent of racial segregation. But it did so not simply to encourage readers to feel shame in their nation. Rather, it expressed hope in America's capacity for change. It insisted that while white, middle-class Americans ought to have known, they had been ignorant of the facts –and to that extent, “two societies” referred to the prospect of a permanently divided future and also the reality of 1968. With the facts now before them, the report implied, white people had a moral burden to support reform, and also a duty to the nation's democratic principles. There lies the problem, though. The Kerner



report could not rally an electoral majority for a program of reform on this scale. It demonstrated that it was possible to reframe nationalism as the cause of colorblind, racial equality, but not necessarily in conjunction with a high level of redistributive government spending. All said, though, what the Kerner report embodied was a moment in history when liberals cemented the cause of racial equality in the idea of American democracy. If it did not resolve deep-rooted injustices, it moved the public debate onwards. Liberals ran short of achieving their objectives, but by contributing to a democratic renewal of the national idea, they demonstrated the value of their leadership.

## Notes

1. Schlesinger, *Vital Center*.
2. 357, "Remarks at the University of Michigan," May 22, 1964, *Public Papers: Johnson, 1963–1964*, Book 1, 704–707; 704. <babel.hathitrust.org> (November 24, 2020).
3. For the concept of "national idea" in historical context, see Beer, *To Make a Nation*, 1–29.
4. Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 248–262.
5. The report was published in full by the Government Printing Office and as a mass-market Bantam Books edition (cover price, \$1.25) under the same title, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. Hereafter, in this article, "Kerner report" refers to the Bantam edition. It sold its first print run, almost three-quarters of a million copies, before they reached the shelves and sold two million within a few years. N.A. "Riot Report Selling at Very Fast Pace," *New York Times*, March 7, 1968, 50; Henry Raymond, "Riot Report Book Big Best Seller," *New York Times*, March 14, 1968, 49. Both <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> (September 9, 2020). See also Rick Loessberg, "Two Societies," 1056.
6. Graham, "The Ambiguous Legacy," 9, 17. Amy Zegart also notes a strand of the scholarship that emphasizes the longer-term influence commissions have on public debate. See Zegart, "Blue Ribbons," 391.
7. Zegart, "Blue Ribbons," 366–367, 390–391. See also Smith, Leyden, and Borrelli, "Predicting the Outcomes of Presidential Commissions," 270–271. For this period, see also Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 350. Gillon lists a number of studies of presidential commissions. Of those, a widely cited example is Wolanin, *Presidential Advisory Commissions*.
8. Kerner report, 536–537.
9. Tom Wicker, "In the Nation: How to 'Bring us Together,'" *New York Times*, November 30, 1969, 245; Tom Wicker, "A Prophecy Fulfilled," *New York Times*, July 17, 1977, 143; John Herbers, "Decade After Kerner Report," *New York Times*, February 26, 1978, 1, 28; Richard Bernstein, "20 Years After the Kerner Report: Three Societies, All Separate," *New York Times*, February 29, 1988, 1, 27. All <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> (September 9, 2020). Additionally, Fred R. Harris and Alan Curtis, "The Unmet Promise of Equality," *New York Times*, February 28, 2018 <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> (September 12, 2019). See also Loessberg, "Two Societies."
10. Myrdal, *American Dilemma*. To understand the study in the context of the emerging Cold War and Civil Rights movement, in respect of the landmark Supreme Court

decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), see Dudziak, “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative,” 66–68.

11. King, *Chaos or Community*.
12. Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness*. Grier and Cobbs, *Black Rage*.
13. Specifically, the copy consulted for this study is the seventh printing of the 1967 Bantam paperback edition.
14. Conot reviewed Hersey’s book, which was published in cloth by Knopf and in paperback by Bantam. Robert Conot, “One Night in Detroit,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1968, 64, 78. For Wicker, see Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, “Tom Wicker, Signifying,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1975, SM 29; Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Books of the Times. Attica: History as a Novel,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1975, 35. All <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> (April 25, 2021). The edition reviewed in both cases was published by Quadrangle Books. Thanks to Jeremy Varon for underlining the importance of Wicker’s career, and of course his prominent role in the Attica uprising.
15. Matusow, *Unraveling of America*, 360–367, where the authors consider the summer riots but not the Kerner commission. Isserman and Kazin, *American Divided*.
16. Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 268–345.
17. Flamm, *Law and Order*, 170; Carter, *Music Has Gone Out of the Movement*, 197–233; Woods, *Prisoners of Hope*, 347–48.
18. Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*.
19. Averbeck, *Liberalism Is Not Enough*, 2–3, 72.
20. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*; Lipsitz, “Possessive Investment in Whiteness”; and Self, *American Babylon*.
21. Gosse, “Movement of Movements; Gosse, “Postmodern America.” See also Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 3–10, 344–400.
22. For the period after 1968, see Gosse, “Postmodern America,” and Hale, “Making of the New Democrats,” 212, 222. See also Goering, “Assessment of President Clinton’s Initiative on Race.”
23. Mills, *Power Elite*.
24. Corporate liberalism describes the political economy of corporate capitalism in twentieth-century America, in which national government took on regulatory powers, promoted partnership between big business and labor unions, and also became an increasingly important customer, fueling economic demand with federal contracts (and so distinguishing this era from the nineteenth-century age of *laissez-faire* capitalism). The term is associated most closely with Sklar, “Woodrow Wilson.” The essay was originally published in *Studies on the Left* in 1960. See also Sklar, *Corporate Reconstruction*; Weinstein, *Corporate Ideal*.
25. See Tom Wicker’s introduction in Kerner report, v. See also Kopkind, “White on Black.”
26. Marx, “Recollections,” 135. Marx had authored an important book on race in America, published in 1967. See Marx, *Protest and Prejudice*.
27. Donald Jackson, “Racism, Not Poverty or Cynicism, Caused the Riots,” *Life*, 64:10 : (1968), 97.
28. For a summary of his reputation at the time of his death in 2011, and in hindsight, see Robert D. McFadden, Tom Wicker obituary, *New York Times*, November 25, 2011, web copy. Anthony Lewis, “Tom Wicker, 1926–2011,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2011, web copy. For a selection, see (all Tom Wicker, *New York Times*): “Johnson – How He Plans to Operate,” January 3, 1965, 127; “Johnson’s Great Society – Lines Are Drawn,” March 14, 1965, 180; “President and Congress:

- Shaping Voting Bill,” March 21, 1965, 170; “Johnson’s 100 Days,” April 15, 1965, 22; “Washington: The Bay of Pigs and Vietnam,” July 23, 1965, 28; “Guns or Butter,” August 15, 1965, 153; “Two Wars: Can Johnson Win Either?” September 2, 1965, 30; “Politics and Vietnam: President Lays It on the Line,” May 22, 1966, H 210; “White Moderates and Black Power,” July 21, 1966, 25; “Time to Pay the Piper,” August 4, 1966, 31; “In The Nation: The Last War on the Home Front,” January 3, 1967, 34; “In the Nation: How Much is a War Worth?” April 27, 1967, Page 44; “In The Nation: Putting First Things Last,” July 16, 1967, 14; “In the Nation: A Grim Cost Analysis,” August 24, 1967, 36; “In the Nation: Air Attacks on Credibility,” September 14, 1967, 46. All <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> (April 26, 2021).
29. Kerner report, v.
  30. Kerner report, vii.
  31. Kerner report, v, vii.
  32. Kerner report, xi.
  33. Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 115, 137, and 225; see also 66, 90, 124.
  34. Kerner report, 558–569.
  35. Kopkind, “White on Black,” 226–259; 242–243 and 252–256.
  36. Kopkind, “White on Black,” 256.
  37. Kopkind, “White on Black,” 257.
  38. Kopkind, “White on Black,” 256–258.
  39. For the original manuscript: David Boesel, Louis Goldberg, Gary T. Marx, and David Sears, *The Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of November 1967*, November 22, 1967, NACCD, series 7, box 1, LBJ Library. See the published edition of the manuscript, edited by the former Assistant Deputy Director (Research) for the commission, Robert Shellow, which includes the recollections of the surviving authors: Shellow (ed.), *Harvest of American Racism*. See also Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 151–175; and McLaughlin, *Long, Hot Summer of 1967*, 43–60.
  40. Boesel, “Recollections,” 125–126. Boesel also mentioned Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* and Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels* as influences.
  41. Shellow (ed.), *Harvest*, 102–108; 102 (for quotation). Additionally, Shellow, “Recollections” and Boesel, “Recollections,” 120–123, 127–130. For Goldberg, see also Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 162.
  42. Sears, “Recollections,” 147.
  43. Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 383.
  44. Boesel, “Recollections,” 126. For “furious,” see Shellow, “Recollections.” For the characterization of the meeting as “stormy,” see Boesel, “Recollections,” 121, 130. Boesel referred to a contemporaneous letter (unsent), written by Lou Goldberg. Boesel remembered Palmieri “radiating a menacing gravity” at those “stormy” meetings. When the commission dismissed the team afterward, Boesel concluded it was because of *Harvest*. He said Goldberg was of the same view. Boesel, “Recollections,” 130. Gillon wrote that Shellow had been “ostracized” by the commission managers after submitting the draft. See Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 166. See also Shellow, “Recollections,” 123. Kopkind wrote that “Ginsburg, who was thought to be the soul of genteel manners and quiet control, spoke of the document in four-letter words,” and apparently “Palmieri said he fairly threw it across the room at Shellow after reading it.” Kopkind, “White on Black,” 249.
  45. The copy held in the Lyndon B. Johnson Library archives (NACCD, series 7, box 1) has “DesTRoy” scrawled across the front page in green ink. The manuscript appears to have narrowly escaped the shredder at some point.

46. Kerner report, 1.
47. See, for example, Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, vol. 1, 220–250.
48. Kerner report, 207. Rhetorically, King had made a similar point. Compare with King, *Chaos or Community*, 110: “Most people are unaware of the darkness of the cave in which the Negro is forced to live.”
49. Kerner report, 235.
50. Kerner report, 23, 413.
51. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*. Originally published in 1947, it ran through multiple editions. See Dittmer, “*From Slavery to Freedom* Fiftieth Anniversary Symposium,” 2.
52. Rudwick and Meier, *From Plantation to Ghetto*.
53. Kerner report, 207–236.
54. Note the prominence the report gives to the East St. Louis race riot, 217–218. Compare with Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis*. See also the discussion of black political thought in Kerner report, 216–217, 220–221, 232–235. Compare with Meier, *Negro Thought in America*.
55. The CIA’s Foreign Broadcast Information Service monitored Carmichael’s public speeches overseas during his 1967 world tour, and these appear in a succession of digests. For this quote: “Meeting with Xuan Thuy,” August 31, 1967, FBIS, *Reportage, 10 August to 5 October, 1967*, 45, Records of NACCD, E2, box 7, LBJ Library.
56. For Gary, Indiana, see Woodard, *Nation within a Nation*, 184–218. For the scope of black power, see Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*. For the meeting of black power, liberalism, and conservatism, see Davies, “Black Power in Action”; Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power*; Weems, Jr, and Randolph, “National Response.”
57. Kerner report, 235.
58. King, *Chaos or Community*, 38–41; see also his comments on the international context, 162–174.
59. Kerner report, 234.
60. Kerner report, 236.
61. Kerner report, 212.
62. Kerner report, 214–221.
63. Kerner report, 223–231.
64. Kerner report, 235–236.
65. Kerner report, 236–250, 251–265, and 266–277. Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 12.
66. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*; Frazier, *Negro Family*. See Cayton’s review of *Negro Family*, Horace R. Cayton, “The Negro’s Share in America,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1949, Section B, 4, 22; see also Louis Wirth’s review of *Black Metropolis*, Louis Wirth, “Negro Life in the Urban North,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1945, Section BR, 5. Both <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> (July 22, 2020).
67. Clark, *Dark Ghetto*. For a review of Clark, see Anna M. Kross, “Wanted: Bootstraps,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1965, 6, 20, 22, <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)> (July 22, 2020). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (the Moynihan report) was completed in March 1965. See the copy reproduced in Rainwater and Yancey, *Moynihan Report*.
68. Transcript, Harry McPherson Oral History Interview V, April 9, 1969, by T. H. Baker (pdf copy), LBJ Library, 2.
69. Back cover copy quoted here rendered in capitals in the original. Compare with Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*.
70. Kerner report, 283.
71. Kerner report, 14, 262; see also 252.

72. Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, 81–110; For Moynihan, see Rainwater and Yancey, *Moynihan Report*, 18–19, 29, 38, 43–44 (corresponding to the reproduced Moynihan report, 64–65, where it directly quotes Frazier, and 75, 84, 88–89). Compare Kerner report, 252 (quoting Moynihan on “social pathology”).
73. Statement of Martin Luther King, Jr, October 23, 1967, NACCD, series 1, box 5 (NACCD microfilm, 4: 0951–0952, 953).
74. Statement of Martin Luther King, Jr, October 23, 1967, NACCD, series 1, box 5 (NACCD microfilm, 4: 0949–0950, 953). Compare with King, *Chaos of Community*, 105–106, where he refers to Frazier’s work in offering an account of ghetto life.
75. 326, “Address to the Nation on Civil Disorders,” July 27, 1967, *Public Papers: Johnson, 1967*, Book 2, 721–724; 721. <babel.hathitrust.org> (November 24, 2020). For the war on poverty policy (part of the Great Society), see Unger, *Best of Intentions*; Katz, *Undeserving Poor*.
76. For the response to Harlem and the other uprisings of 1964, see Memorandum, September 24, 1964, “CIVIL RIGHTS POINTS FOR DEMOCRATIC SPEAKERS,” and Memorandum, Louis Martin to Lee White, July 23, 1964. Both Aides–White, box 5, LBJ Library. See also Memorandum for the President, July 27, 1964, WHCF, HU2, box 3, LBJ Library.
77. McCone attributed Watts to the “dull, devastating spiral of failure that awaits the average disadvantaged child.” See *Violence in the City*, 5.
78. For example, NA, “Negro Revolt Echoes to the Ugly Crack of Sniper Fire,” 63, no. 4 (1967), 11–28A; 19. Or N.A., “Races: The Jungle and the City,” *Time* 88, no. 5 (1966), 11.
79. Boesel, “Recollections,” 128.
80. Harris, *Alarms and Hopes*. Gillon found that Harris, doubtful that the Kerner report would live up to his aspirations, secretly contacted his publisher before writing the book. Gillon, *Separate*, 149. For a contemporaneous report, see Memorandum, Henry B. Talliaferro to Staff, September 19, 1967, NACCD, series E4, box 21, LBJ Library.
81. Harris, *Alarms and Hopes*, 6–7.
82. Harris, *Alarms and Hopes*, 109–110.
83. Harris, *Alarms and Hopes*, 99.
84. Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*, 152.
85. Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 196.
86. See note 38 above.
87. Kopkind, “White on Black,” 241, 256–257; and Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 193–199.
88. Gillon, *Separate and Unequal*, 200–207.
89. Kerner report, 389.
90. Kerner report, 391.
91. Kerner report, 393.
92. For context, see Katz, *Undeserving Poor*, 98–101.
93. For Cincinnati: field team interviews (Cincinnati, OH), John Hanson, NACCD, series 59, box 1 (NACCD microfilm, 23: 0657–0658); see also field team interviews (Cincinnati, OH), William C. Wichman, NACCD, series 59, box 1 (NACCD microfilm, 23: 0526). For Plainfield: team evaluation report (n.d.) and Memos, NACCD, series 59, box 5 (NACCD microfilm, 26: 0291, 0352). For Newark: field team interviews (Newark, NJ), Robert Curvin, NACCD, series 59, box 4 (NACCD microfilm, 25: 0484).
94. Detroit debriefing tapes, CD copy, 15’40” to 16’24”, WHCA-7084-10-1, LBJ Library. For context, see Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 73, 75, 88–89, 91–92.

95. For Nashville: *Nashville Field Report*, Part I and Part II, NACCD, series 13, box 71, LBJ Library; Oddie Wingfield, initial report, June 19, 1967, pp. 1–6, NACCD, series 59, box 4 (NACCD microfilm, 25: 0394). For Jackson: Lamar Clements, daily field report, August 11, 1967, NACCD, series 59, box 3 (NACCD microfilm, 24: 0644–0674); *Jackson Field Report*, Part I, NACCD, series 13, box 69, LBJ Library.
96. On City Hall: Amos Parker field team interview (NACCD microfilm, 23: 0283–0284). On the Chamber of Commerce: field team interviews (Atlanta, GA), Richard Boone, NACCD, series 59, box 1 (NACCD microfilm, 23: 0148). On poverty: Dare, “Involvement of the Poor,” 127.
97. Memorandum, “Houston, Texas,” December 21, 1967, 4, 6–7, 9, NACCD, series 5, box 3 (NACCD microfilm, 8: 0280, 0282–0283, 0285). See also *Houston Field Report*, Part II, T-3, 1; T-8, 2; T-11, 3, NACCD, series 13, box 70, LBJ Library.
98. Boesel, “Recollections,” 128. See also Shellow (ed.), *Harvest*, 102–108.
99. For “rebellions,” see “Stokely Carmichael Speech at First Laso Conference,” (translated from a transcription published in *Bohemia* magazine, August 11, 1967), FBIS, *Reportage and Comment on Stokely Carmichael’s Activities and Statements Abroad 10 August to 5 October 1967, October 9 1967*, 2–3, Records of NACCD, E2, box 7, LBJ Library. For “linked,” see “Report on Carmichael Statement to APS,” September 8, 1967, FBIS, *Reportage, 10 August to October 5 1967*, 55, Records of NACCD, E2, box 7, LBJ Library. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 169–187. As Joseph has observed, what emerged resembled the American tradition of pluralism – but it was turned to radically democratic ends. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 198–201.
100. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 169–187.
101. Kerner report, 22, 397–398.
102. Kerner report, 407–408.

## Acknowledgments

I would like thank Linda Albin, Jeremy Varon, and this journal’s anonymous referees for their invaluable advice and comments.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Malcolm McLaughlin* is Associate Professor of American Studies and History at UEA, the University of East Anglia, in the UK.

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