

Two Cheers for the National Riot (Kerner) Commission Report

In J.F. Szwed, Black Americans: A Second Look. Basic Books, 1970.

By [Gary T. Marx](#)

As a result of its mixed racial, ethnic, and religious composition, it is not surprising that American society has occasionally seen underlying tensions spill over into collective violence. Thus one can note violent destruction of the Indians and early attacks on Quakers, anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic riots in the 1840s, occasional slave uprisings, the 1863 anti-draft, anti-Negro riots in New York, the anti-Chinese outburst in California in 1871, and major race riots between whites and blacks in 1917 at East Saint Louis; 1919 at Chicago, and 1943 in Detroit, as well as the 1943 anti-Mexican riot in Los Angeles. Political and labor violence, from Shay's Rebellion and the Stamp Act Riots in the eighteenth century to bloody fighting in twentieth-century mill and mine disputes, has also been much in evidence. Recent racial violence is thus hardly new to the American scene, though the exact nature of the causal link between earlier violence and recent uprisings is difficult to determine. However, the scale of recent disorders has been unprecedented in the history of the country.

Also distinctive is the fact that recent violence, often growing out of a police incident, has been restricted to ghetto areas and involves blacks striking out at the authorities, property, and symbols of white society, rather than at whites per se. Earlier racial violence, not restricted to ghetto areas, tended to be initiated by whites and involved black and white civilians with authorities often playing a passive role. Earlier ethnic violence was more pogrom-like in nature, while violence of the 1960s has more the character of colonial uprisings.

An additional new factor involves reports of the quality of those issued by post-riot investigating groups such as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders and the New Jersey Select Commission on Civil Disorders. [1](#) With one or two notable exceptions, earlier riot commission inquiries fell far short of the objectivity, compassion, scope, and intelligence found in these recent reports. [2](#)

The report of the National Advisory Commission is perhaps the most significant and far-reaching statement of a programmatic nature ever made by a governmental unit on American race relations. [3](#) It is a major call for new will and resources and a reordering of national priorities. In 1968 it represented the broadest compilation of materials on intergroup relations since the publication of Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* twenty-six years before. Contrary to some black radicals' echoing of Camus, it suggests that a society can condemn itself.

Cynics may, of course, suggest that it has all been said before, and perhaps in clearer, more manageable form. Yet it has not been said before with the potential power of a presidential-level commission composed of Establishment moderates.

Two premises underlay the commission's work. The first is a basic tenet of every such investigating group's work, from the British Corfield report on the Mau Mau to the McCone Commission report on Watts namely, that a nation cannot tolerate violence and disorder. What sets this report apart is the second tenet, which suggests that the nation will not deserve freedom from violence "unless it can demonstrate the wisdom and the will to undertake decisive action against the root causes of racial disorder." among the most important of root causes are not conspirators, or those with a false sense of grievance, but the very organization of white-dominated society.

Two of the most salient factors in the report have to do with the lack of black political access as a condition predisposing cities to violence and the role of the police during the disorders.

The commission reports that in Tampa, Florida, Negroes are 20 per cent of the population, yet there are no Negroes in the city council or school board. In Atlanta, Georgia (42 per cent Negro) one of sixteen aldermen is black. In Cincinnati, Ohio, there is only one Negro on the city council, and of eighty-one members of city commissions, one was black. In Newark, New Jersey, more than half Negro, seven out of nine city councilmen and board of education members are white. In Detroit, Michigan (more than one third black) one of nine councilmen was Negro. What is even more conducive to disorder is that this under-representation often occurs in an atmosphere of grievances acknowledged but unacted upon and promises made but broken.

Compared to the degree of bloodshed in recent racial disorders in Indonesia, Nigeria, and earlier in South Africa and India, America's racial violence seems mild. An important factor in keeping down broader racial confrontation and widespread killing has been the power and professionalism of the police. Yet if such a judgment may be made in a comparative perspective, it may not be made in any absolute sense. As this report makes very clear, there were some instances, particularly in Detroit and Newark, where police behavior seemed as much to create disorder as to control it.

Snapping power lines, firecrackers, and nervous, untrained police and national guardsmen caused much indiscriminate firing. The police often faced a very difficult job for which they were unprepared. According to the director of the Newark police, "Down in the Springfield Avenue area it was so bad that, in my opinion guardsmen were firing upon police and police were firing back, at them." With an honesty not always found in such documents the report gives many disturbing examples of the accidental killing of innocent people and in some cases of official murder. Conflict was clearly escalated by such behavior, along with the National Guard's smashing of stores with "soul brother" written on them. In Newark, the removal of badges and taping over of squad car license numbers by the police in Detroit, the arrest in Cincinnati on loitering charges of antipoverty workers trying to calm things, the misuse of bail and indiscriminate sentencing by judges, the lack of cooperation among various authorities, and official expectations of a riot that in some cases led to extra heavy policing and the occupying of an area by the National Guard with jeeps and tanks even before a disturbance had begun. [4](#)

Yet I think the significance of the report lies not so much in the originality of its indictment as in the character of those making the indictment, not so much in the clarity of its presentation as in the scope of its recommendations, and not so much in the academic thoroughness of its analysis as in its compassion and sense of urgency.

Without in any way denying the enormity of America's interracial problems, the predominant responsibility of white society for these problems, and the great need for the kind of action recommended by the commission, I would like to raise some critical questions about the report's analysis of the disorders themselves (a factor somewhat independent of the position of the Negro in America and the steps needed to change this position). [5](#)

My critical comments will revolve around the report's failure to deal with variation in types of disorders, to refine and document the importance of current racism, to discuss the general connection between external war (and the Vietnam War in particular) and internal disorder, and its inadequate treatment of postriot consequences.

Types of Disorder

The report notes: "We have been unable to identify constant patterns in all aspects of civil disorder. We have found that they are unusual, irregular, complex . . . and unpredictable social processes" [6](#) This kind of layman's sociology is disappointing in the face of data that almost leap up at the reader waiting to be interpreted. The issue is not to find universal themes but rather to explain variation and typical patterns of development. An adequate answer to the question "Why did it happen?" depends on a careful elaboration of what "it" is. There is an unfortunate tendency in the report to treat disturbances as if they were all of one kind. Almost the only systematic acknowledgment of variation comes in the classification (using four criteria whose interrelations are not made clear) of riots as "major," "serious," and "minor." [7](#)

Among variables that would have been useful in categorizing disorders are things such as the degree of political articulation, the degree to which the disturbance was offensive or defensive in nature, and whether crowd aims were primarily expressive or instrumental. To consider Cambridge, Maryland, a city with essentially a "defensive riot" in the same terms as Plainfield, New Jersey, a city with a very political disturbance, or to consider the first Dayton disturbance, which involved an expressive bar crowd, with Detroit and Newark, both of which experienced full-scale armed insurrections, does not advance understanding. One reason social scientists have thus far been unable to find very meaningful correlations between background factors and whether or not a city experienced disorders certainly lies in this tendency to treat all riots as if they were the same.

The analysis section of the report (chapter two), with the exception of a useful profile of rioters in Detroit and Newark, is dominated by long lists containing things such as the number of cities in which tear gas was used, the number of times various kinds of grievances were mentioned, the number of times curfew was imposed. This is analysis by description. Such facts are the building blocks out of which explanation should emerge. However, while a welter of facts is presented, they are not sufficiently interpreted and interrelated, nor are presumed causal factors related to each other or to different types of disorder in a systematic way.

This part of the report, which analyzes the actual riot situation, is also unduly static. The sense that a riot is an emergent process (independent of a wide array of factors conducive to violence in the preriote situation), very much dependent on the nature of the interaction between the police and the black community, is lacking. The important fact that in some cities as the disturbance grew police became subject to the same collective behavior phenomena as rioters (rumor, fear, frustration, emotional contagion, lessening of inhibitions, breakdown of social organization, innovative behavior) is not sufficiently dealt with.

Racism

In seeking to explain the disorders the commission rejected conspiracies and criminal element theories and focused instead on racism and poverty. It notes, "...white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."

While the stress on racism may seem to some people politically inopportune as well as sociologically oversimplified, it has the virtue of pointing out that many of the problems faced by blacks stem from the system of social organization rather than from the personal failings of individual Negroes. In a society heavily biased on the side of rugged individualism, such an emphasis may not be out of line. It is doubtful that this stress on racism will hurt the black power movement the way President Johnson's "We shall overcome" speech earlier hurt the civil rights movement.

While I think the focus on racism is correct on both strategic and intellectual grounds, it could have been better documented and treated in a conceptually more sophisticated way. Racism is not a unidimensional concept, nor does it involve all whites or affect all blacks in the same way.

The concept of racism as used is too abstract and general. Because it accuses everyone, it accuses no one. While in a subtle sense any white who grows up in American culture cannot escape a degree of racism or profiting economically and psychologically from a society stratified by color, there are vast differences between individuals and institutions with respect to their benefit from racism and the amount and kind of racism. While all may be guilty, some of the pigs (in George Orwell's sense, not the black militant's) are more guilty than others. What is needed is, if not a report that names names, at least one that names institutions and contrasts varying manifestations of racism. One looks in vain for an adequate discussion of who specifically profits in what ways from having a large black underclass. Just which white institutions created, maintain, and condone the ghetto?

The report would have been more persuasive if it had differentiated institutional from idiosyncratic racism, racist attitudes from racist behavior, self-conscious and intended racism from subconscious or nonreflective and unintentional behavior and attitudes that may have racist consequences, and done more to document rather than simply assert the importance of current racism. One can wonder whether the average suburban white, who rarely has any kind of contact with Negroes and who rejects the more vulgar stereotypes, will come away from the report with an appreciation of the prevalence or importance of current racism.

The analytical and descriptive sections of the report dealing with the disorders might have been more closely linked to the policy recommendations. [8](#) In its recommendations for action the report relies as much, or more, on a model stressing the internal weaknesses of the Negro community as on self-conscious racism. The recommendations for action also deal more with the consequences of racism and changing the Negro community than with direct attacks on racism and changing whites. This is partly related to the failure to elaborate racism and to show how it interacts with other causal factors.

Confusion also emerges in the "why did it happen" section of the report, where racism is used in an undifferentiated way to account for both the position of the Negro in America and riots. While it is relevant to both, it would seem to apply more clearly to the former.

The bitter fruits of racism are seen to be pervasive discrimination and segregation, white exodus and black migration, and the black ghetto, with its circle of failure, crime, and dependency. Such factors may well be necessary conditions for the occurrence of violence. Yet one could note that such conditions exist in most Negro communities, the majority of which have not had serious disturbances, as well as in communities that have had very different kinds of disturbances. And in these communities only a minority of the population participates. Nor does a focus on racism help us understand why relatively "good" cities such as New Haven, Connecticut and Atlanta experienced disorders, while relatively "bad" cities such as Oakland, California, or smaller Southern cities did not. Nor does it tell us why the increase in disorders seems directly proportional (in both a temporal and a geographical sense) to a decrease in the degree of racism. [9](#)

Racism, as it relates to the position of the Negro in American society, while strongly necessary for a full understanding of disorder, is not synonymous with it.

Two Wars

In its search for possible causal factors, an important omission is almost any mention of the Vietnam War and of the general connection between war and civil disorder. Wars abroad have been strongly related to violent internal conflicts at home. More than two-thirds of all race riots in the fifty-year period from 1913 to 1963 occurred during (or immediately before or after) war periods. Or put another way, approximately three-quarters of the race riots occurred in the one-quarter of the years devoted to wars. [10](#)

The four largest race riots before the Vietnam War came during war periods. The Civil War saw the New York draft riots where perhaps two thousand people were killed (no one bothered to keep serious count, and there were instances where police responded to rioters by simply throwing them off buildings). World War I witnessed the very brutal East Saint Louis disturbance in which forty-eight people were killed. After whites set fire to several hundred black homes, white snipers fired at Negroes as they fled the flames. A white mob battled the firemen. The end of World War I saw the 1919 Chicago riot in which thirty-eight died. This followed an incident where a Negro swimmer drifted across the line

separating the "Negro" water from the "white" water. An incident at an amusement park triggered the 1943 Detroit riot, which left thirty-three people dead and almost a thousand injured.

One needs only the degree of expertise of the person who accused a sociologist of being a man who spent \$100,000 to find a house of prostitution to get at some of the basic reasons for the general connection between external wars and outbursts of internal violence. A brutalization of the atmosphere occurs where life is not valued. Models for violent behavior are communicated, as is the implicit belief that force and coercion are acceptable ways of solving problems. While wars may unify a country, this often comes about at the cost of increased intolerance for racial, religious, or ideological outsiders. Wars bring various kinds of social, economic, and geographical dislocations. The hold of traditional agents of social control may be weakened. Expansions of the war-time economy have often led to advances for Negroes. Such black advancement may create fears among a threatened white working class and generate even greater Negro discontent. Furthermore black aspirations are raised in wars fought to "make the world safe for democracy" or to "secure the four freedoms" or to "resist communist tyranny." The ideology which helps unite the society may at the same time increase the sense of oppression among its minorities.

That riots have increased as the Vietnam War has escalated may thus represent more than a fortuitous correlation. In some ways we may simply be seeing a continuation of an earlier pattern, although disturbances have changed from the classic race riot where whites attack Negroes to one in which Negroes attack the police and system." [11](#)

Many of the above factors are relevant to understanding contemporary disorder, just as they are relevant to the many war year disturbances in this century. Yet a more immediate link between the Asian war and the disturbances at home may lie in expenditures. The Vietnam War has clearly drawn vital energy and resources away from the cities in a context of heightened aspirations. [12](#) While the money spent in Vietnam has increased 250 times from \$103 million in 1964-1965 to \$25 billion in 1968, under the threat of Sargent Shriver's resignation Congress barely managed to give the poverty program \$1.7 billion. In some vital areas funds have been cut back. Where urban and human welfare programs have not been crippled by the war, they have in no way expanded to meet the need. In many models of violent uprisings the government's failure to carry out its pre-Vietnamese promises would be seen as conducive to internal violence.

While the effect of wars in general, or this war in particular, on the outbreak of civil disorder cannot be precisely measured, the report might at least have hinted at these factors. [13](#) Even more significant is the report's failure to consider the inhibiting effect of continuation of the war on the call for massive domestic expenditures implied in its recommendations.

Post-Riot Consequences

In the play *MacBird* by Barbara Garson one of the witches notes:

*It's wondrous warm,
And all the world's abroad, out laughin', boppin'.
A joyful throng comes pouring out of doors
A brick in either hand --they're goin' shoppin'.
O blessed, blessed blaze, the land's alight
And I have never seen so sweet a sight. [14](#)*

It is important to ask to what extent a riot may be seen as "so sweet a sight."

Whatever the varied personal motives and characteristics of rioters, the degree of randomness or purposiveness in the destruction, and the degree of cooperation and organization among participants, the event they collectively helped create often had a meaning which far transcended their individual psychology. People focusing only on the criminal, youth, or class aspects of a disturbance often fail to see this.

For perhaps understandable reasons, the report gives inadequate consideration to the possible positive consequences of the violence. The commission asserts that violence can never be a factor in bringing about a change. Nevertheless in a majority of the cities it studied there was evidence of positive change following the disorders, though the change has rarely been major and in some cases was short-lived, not to mention the fact that the disturbances have served as the vehicle for this commission's urgent call for a reordering of national priorities. Just as Negroes taking to the streets in civil disobedience -in the early 1960s seemed to inspire much civil rights legislation and activity, so recent violence has spurred great concern with what is called the urban crisis, a crisis not defined exclusively in terms of violence (as even the competing riot report of the New Jersey State Patrolmen's Benevolent Association on racial disorder indicates).

In *Making It*, Norman Podhoretz argues that the dirty little secret of the intellectuals is that success is fun. In the same

way it might be argued that the dirty little secret of the Negroes is that violence, or more properly confrontation, sometimes produces change. In some cases the violence has had a communications function and, in the absence of other channels, has served as a kind of primitive political mechanism whereby minor concessions were gained, not unlike the almost institutionalized rioting in England in the eighteenth century. [15](#)

When traditional politics fail to handle tensions and frustrations built into the social system, the implications of mass violence as an alternative must be appreciated. Poor blacks don't have many votes, much money, or extensive political skills. However, they (and their leaders, to a sometimes embarrassingly undetermined degree) [16](#) do have a kind of negative power to disrupt society.

The issue is not that blacks can overthrow the system by force or can win in an armed confrontation, but that the violence gives an indication of their latent power. It may add credibility to future threats and make continuing the status quo that much more expensive. That blacks might be the ultimate losers in a full-scale armed confrontation is independent of the fact that the relative cost to the dominant society, even with its "victory," might be too great to bear and certainly much greater than the cost of needed social change.

In looking at those changes that have occurred, the repeal of an anti-loitering law, the appointment of a black precinct captain or special assistant to the mayor, the release of antipoverty funds, the creation of a few new jobs, the enforcement of housing codes, the improvement of garbage collection, and the provision of portable swimming pools do not change the face of modern America, though in some small degree they may make life more tolerable for many of those victimized by intolerance and indifference. But the violence can also inspire repression and the surfacing of antidemocratic sentiments.

Perhaps a more significant kind of change than immediate concessions relates to the effect of the disturbance on the internal organization of the black community. In some communities solidarity and political awareness seem to have increased. New organizations and leaders have emerged, and the disturbance has served as a catalyst for subsequent efforts to bring about change through working within the system. [17](#)

In Atlanta, boycotts of merchants thought to be dishonest were triggered, and in Milwaukee, Father Groppi's open housing demonstrations began. The violence both reflects and has led to a reorientation of the struggle toward the needs of poorer blacks. There is also impressionistic evidence that some riot participants gained a sense of manhood and dignity in striking out. [18](#) It no doubt would have been impolitic for such a commission to analyze adequately the positive as well as the negative consequences of the violence. Changes must be seen to come, as the president suggests, "not because we are frightened by conflict, but because we are fired by conscience." Though it is tragic, all too often conscience becomes fired only after a disaster, if then. [19](#)

In a preliminary short-run (up to a period of four months following a city's riot) consideration of postriot consequences, I found it useful to contrast communities using the following two dimensions: (1) the degree to which polarization and backlash have occurred; (2) the degree to which change beneficial to Negroes has come about. When these dimensions are dichotomized and combined, cities can be classified into one of four possible types.

Table 1: Typology of Consequences

		Increased Communication and Efforts at Change?	
		YES	NO
Polarization of Racial Attitudes?	YES	I	II
		Detroit, MI	Cambridge, MD
		Plainfield, IL	Jersey City, NJ
		Cincinnati, OH	Waukegan, IL
	NO	III	IV
		Grand Rapids, MI	Rockford, IL
		New Brunswick, NJ	Tucson, AZ
		Atlanta, GA	Phoenix, AZ

Where a city falls in this typology is to an important extent a function of (1) the type of disturbance it had (in particular, its size and whether or not demands were presented), and (2) certain preriot characteristics of the city (especially the

city administration's degree of liberalism on racial matters). [20](#)

Perhaps the most interesting type of city is that which shows positive change and relatively little polarization (III). In this category there tended to be cities with an already liberal administration which experienced medium-sized disturbances. Here a municipal government previously committed to positive racial change realized that it simply wasn't doing enough. The disturbances were large enough to trigger concern but not of sufficient intensity to create a high degree of polarization. Post-riot change was also more likely in those cities where demands and negotiations were present during the disturbance. This was usually related to whether or not the disturbance grew out of existing community issues and level of political awareness.

Cities with major disturbances tended to show both change and polarization (I). The size of the disturbance cannot help but harden attitudes. [21](#) At the same time, precisely because of the very intensity of the disturbance, there is likely to be some realization that the community has failed to resolve its problems and must do more.

Medium-sized or small disturbances in cities with racially conservative policies tended to result in increased polarization and no change or even a worsening of conditions for blacks (II). Here already existing repressive attitudes simply hardened. Cities with a large working and lower middle class of South and East European origin were also less likely to show a positive change.

Cities such as Rockford, Illinois, or Tucson, Arizona, where the disturbance had little political meaning and was very minor, tended to show no change. Since nothing much happened, there was little in the way of polarization or improvement (IV).

Ironically some of the same factors that inhibit massive social change also inhibit polarization; for example, traditional values and a plurality of interest groups, often with overlapping memberships. An additional study finds resistance to post-riot change in four policy areas to increase as the psychological closeness of whites to blacks within these areas increases. For example, job training programs and nonintegrated public housing met with less resistance than urban renewal relocation programs and school desegregation. [22](#)

Another significant, if largely unheralded, consequence seems to have been a move on the part of police away from a "heavy weapons philosophy" to more sophisticated techniques of control. Police showed much greater restraint in the riots that followed the death of Martin Luther King in 1968 than in the summer of 1967. During this period the report appeared, and the commission and justice Department sponsored a number of conferences for police chiefs.

As a result of the failure to adequately consider types of disorders and post-riot consequences, the meaning the commission gives to the disorders is never entirely clear. Though granting that they were produced by past and current oppression, the commission leaves unanswered the delicate matter of whether (or more properly when and to what extent) the disorders were articulate and focused protest, as against simply being the expression of blind rage. The "rubber band" grievance model of rioting adopted is consistent with either point of view.

Other Commissions

Though it remains to be documented, many of the criticisms made of other commissions might apply here as well: that its work was rushed and somewhat uncoordinated, that some material was withheld, that the character of commission appointees was too political, that it was not critical enough of the executive arm, and minor inconsistencies and errors exist in the final report. Questions might also be raised about the general workings of the staff and the nature of its relationship with the commission. [23](#)

Yet had some of the above factors been otherwise and had the report gone further in dealing with types of disorder, in considering the connection between war and internal violence or in elaborating the theme of racism, nothing significant would be changed. Our understanding of civil disorder might be somewhat improved and those whose deity is an abstract scientism a little happier. Yet the urgent need for a reordering of national priorities and for change along the lines recommended by the commission would remain.

In the last analysis this is a political and not a social science document, though it sought legitimacy partly by making use of social scientists. [24](#) The purpose of this commission was not so much to generate new knowledge as to mobilize new sentiment, not so much to develop innovative solutions as to legitimize existing untried solutions. Fortunately, unlike most earlier riot inquiries, this is ultimately not a report about riots but about the position of the Negro in American society.

In concluding, the commission stated that it uncovered "no startling truths, no unique insights," and much of what it reports is well known to social scientists. Yet I think its truths are quite startling, if not new. In many ways American society is already two separate nations, and democratic values are partially destroyed. Irving Louis Horowitz has written: "This is an age of redefinition for the American Negro in which the very words 'American' and 'Negro' are at stake. Whether they shall continue to be used in conjunction, or whether they shall come to signify utterly contrasting

entities and aims is precisely what the present crisis is about." [25](#) Even if one is not satisfied with everything in this document, there are strong grounds for supporting it because of its implications for lessening the separation of the words American and Negro.

In responding to the 1967 summer disorders, President Johnson called for a national day of prayer and a study commission. We have the admirable results of the study commission and hopefully will not be left only with prayer, though a study commission alone is as ethereal as prayer. As one pundit grimly pointed out, the last time urban change was left to the Lord was at Sodom and Gomorrah.

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Notes

1. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam, 1968); Governor's Select Committee on Civil Disorder, State of New Jersey, Report for Action, 1968.

2. Exceptions are reports investigating the 1919 Chicago riot and the 1935 and 1943 Harlem disorders.

For a discussion of the diagnostic sociological style of recent and some earlier commission reports which permits sympathy for the plight of urban Negroes and at the same time offers a way of coming to terms with the mass unruliness and riot particularly disturbing to middle-class sensibilities see A. Silver, "Official Interpretations of Race Riots", "Urban Riots", *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (July, 1968).

3. It would have been useful if the commission had considered why similar recommendations, when made in the past, have not been acted upon and had given a clearer sense of how its objectives were to be achieved. There also may be some tension between programs which call for both greater integration and enrichment of the ghetto and an emphasis on local community control and greater regional and metropolitan cooperation.

4. This is in great contrast to the consideration of police behavior by most earlier riot commissions. While it is admirable that the report does not mince in its presentation of material that may reflect negatively on some control agents, it is unfortunate that it draws few general conclusions out of the often disparate collection of facts presented. One has to put together his own picture that in some cities, after a period of time, there almost seemed to be two riots or that traditional control strategies sometimes had the opposite of their intended effect. These and related ideas are expanded in Gary T. Marx, "Civil Disorder and the Agents of Social Control," *Journal of Social Issues*, forthcoming.

5. To some extent the constraints under which riot commissions operate make them sitting ducks for social science critics. For a discussion of the constraints which recent riot commissions have faced, including scarcity of time and resources, inability to criticize the executive who created the commission, diversity of viewpoints and interests among commissioners chosen to be representative of various groups, the need for political as well as scientific legitimacy, and lack of power to implement recommendations see M. Lipsky and D. Olson, "On the Politics of Riot Commissions" (Paper read at 1968 American Political Science Association Meetings, Washington, D.C.).

6. Report of the National Advisory Commission pp. 109-110. This world view is also expressed in the consideration of riot control strategies. The report notes "no single tactic appeared to be effective in containing or reducing violence in all situations." Given the great variation in the disorders and even in the same riot at different time periods, the task is clearly not to find the Universal Riot Control Rule, but to consider what the consequences of various tactics were in different situations.

7. Nor does the report indicate what its criteria for labeling an event a riot were. It notes that "because definitions of 'civil disorder' vary widely, between 51 and 217 disorders were recorded by various agencies as having occurred during the first nine months of 1967." The commission "developed a list" and settled on the figure of 164 disturbances (page 112).

Two related problems are the failure to indicate how twenty-three cities picked for intensive study were chosen and the failure to make public the documentation for the very useful riot profiles. For an area which the president has referred to as "a thicket of tension, conflicting evidence and extreme opinions" with only a few exceptions, the riot descriptions have a strong sense of certainty to them. Documentation would help the reader weigh the evidence. If some sources might suffer from being publicly revealed, then whatever material they generated should not have been used or only those sources should have been excluded from the public documentation. A related issue, apparently still unresolved, involves the disposition of the many reports and studies done for the commission, including community and riot profiles of the twenty-three cities. Some of this material would be of invaluable aid to scholars as well as being a prod to social change. It would be sad indeed if such material was dumped in the archives until it was safely irrelevant.

8. In noting that ". . . one of the few hard pieces of information presented concerning education in the report is that

rioters were better educated than those classified as uninvolved," one observer suggests, "Thus, if the commission's goal is to prevent disorders, it would seem that they should have proposed programs to decrease educational opportunities for black Americans. Obviously such a suggestion is preposterous, yet it illustrates the unclear connection between specific findings and policy recommendations." Richard J. Light, "Report Analysis: National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder," *Harvard Educational Review*, forthcoming.

9. The use of a framework such as that advanced by Smelser in his book on collective behavior would have allowed for a more systematic linkage of necessary and sufficient conditions and the integration of different levels of analysis. N. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1962).

10. For example, see S. Leiberson and A. Silverman, "The Precipitants and Underlying Conditions of Race Riots," *American Sociological Review* (December, 1965), and David Garson, "Collective Violence in America" (doctoral dissertation, Department of Government, Harvard University). The Korean War is something of an exception to this pattern, although a major riot did occur in Cicero, Illinois, in 1951.

11. This change makes it more difficult to predict that subsequent periods of peace (should they emerge) will again be associated with the relative absence of racial disorder.

12. As an aside, we can note that until the issuance of this report and hints of the reorientation of governmental policy in Asia, the American public held a number of common misconceptions about civil disorder and the war in Vietnam. In some of the same ways the public was misinformed about the war, it was misinformed about urban violence at home. Similar distortions no doubt served similar functions.

We were told that the United States is winning the war in Asia and the war on poverty. We were told that the Viet Cong could not gain by using force and that riots only hurt Negroes. In both cases opponents of the U.S. government were labeled an atypical minority engaged in activities that had little to do with protest over grievances. The war was not seen as a civil war but as an invasion from the north. The majority of the South Vietnamese people were said to be loyal to Saigon. The Viet Cong were motivated not by nationalism or economic grievances but by a monolithic communist scheme for world domination. In like fashion, President Johnson has stated that riots at home have nothing to do with civil rights protest. According to the McCone Commission, only a small fraction of the Negro community was active in Los Angeles. This group was seen to consist mainly of the criminal element and/or poor illiterate Southern migrants unprepared for city life. The masses of Negroes (in a reversal of an earlier stereotype) were seen to be "decent law abiding citizens" who have no sympathy with riots or understanding of rioters.

13. Of course the type of war is relevant as well. It seems less likely that blacks would be rioting if the current war was directed against racist South Africa, although whites might well be rioting then.

14. Barbara Carson, *Macbird* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 7

15. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (New York: Norton, 1965), especially Chapter VII; G. Rude, *The Crowd in History, 1730-1848* (New York: Wiley, 1964).

16. In several cities black leaders gained concessions from the city in return for a promise to stop the violence, only to find that they could not stop it.

17. However, those involved in subsequent political action were not necessarily those involved in the riot.

18. Similar changes have been noted following earlier riots. See, especially, the report on the 1919 Chicago race riot, where a new "self-respect" was seen as a result of Negroes fighting back when they were attacked. A. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

19. Even here it is interesting to note how claims for change are often made in public relations-riot avoidance language for fear of seeming soft. This is somewhat analogous to those who publicly oppose the Vietnam War, not on principle, but because of what it does to the balance-of-payments problem.

20. This is a tentative, nonqualitative effort, dealing only with local, short-run postriot consequences. It is merely meant to be suggestive of the kind of analysis that might be more rigorously carried out. There is a major methodological problem involved in determining whether a change beneficial to Negroes which occurred after a riot was in fact a result of the riot. Atlanta claimed the mobilization of city resources (the appearance of garbage trucks, building code inspectors, and improved recreation facilities) on the second day of the riot was part of a program devised long before the disturbance. However as the disturbance faded into the background so did improved city services. There is also a problem of time lag; thus a change stimulated by the riot, particularly if well planned and thought out, may not appear until well after the disorders.

The concepts of polarization and backlash are not very well thought out. In the cities observed polarization within racial groups seemed almost as common as polarization between them. Ironically while a disturbance may internally polarize the two communities, it can drive moderate blacks and liberal whites together and hence may increase racial cooperation. A similar cooperation, although perhaps somewhat perverse, can unite black nationalists and conservative whites in their support of separatism.

21. This can be exaggerated. Attitude studies do not suggest a massive change in sentiment regarding civil rights issues on the part of the mass of whites at a national level. Whites continue to show a pattern of disapproving of Negro protest means but substantial support for Negro goals. Whites in a national Harris poll following the 1967 summer showed greater acceptance of Negroes in various kinds of interaction than ever before. While the embers and tempers of Newark and Detroit were still glowing, two out of three whites favored setting up large-scale government work projects for the unemployed and six in ten favored federal programs to tear down ghettos and exterminate rats.

There clearly has been a negative reaction to violent protest, yet this does not seem to represent a shift away from prior support for nonviolent protest. Thus early in the civil rights struggle a majority of whites felt the freedom rides would hinder integration, and seven in ten felt mass demonstrations would hurt the Negro cause. An August, 1963, Gallup poll reports an unfavorable white reaction by a three to one ratio to the very respectable and nonviolent March on Washington, and only slightly less offered disapproval of students organizing in Mississippi. A 1964 poll found 73 per cent of the white public felt Negroes should stop demonstrating now that they have made their point.

There has been and remains relatively great white opposition to Negro protest activities whether violent or nonviolent and alongside of this increasing support for many basic Negro goals.

22. Lipsky and Olson, "On the Politics of Riot Commissions."

23. It has been suggested by some that this will become the Warren Commission Report of the races and trigger the same controversy. Yet this seems doubtful. The Warren Commission dealt with a single concrete event which was new and shocking. This report deals with an old multifaceted problem about which much is known and even more has been said. The Warren Commission could well have been wrong in its central finding, and if so the whole meaning and tenor of the report would change. Yet this commission is not as vulnerable. The forms, dimensions, extensiveness, and consequences of white racism are of course debatable. But the magnitude of our interracial problems is not.

But, like the anti-conspirational Warren Report, this report finds "no evidence that all or any of the disorders or incidents that led to them were planned or directed by any organization or group, international, national, or local." In light of the conditions documented by this report, some might wonder why there has been so little conspiracy or planning, and why so little sniping by Negroes has occurred (and, where present, it was sometimes induced by the indiscriminate firing of authorities). Relatively more Negroes than whites have been killed in these recent disturbances where Negroes are on the offensive than in earlier, "classical" race riots where whites attacked Negroes. The explanation of this, perhaps, lies in the Negro's lack of resources and training for internal war, his fear of retaliation, the success of police intelligence, and an overreading of the extent of an active, violent, revolutionary ethos. Several of these factors are no doubt changing now, although perhaps not so rapidly as is believed by many gripped in a riot hysteria.

24. This is clear in the following exchange that occurred as the commission was getting organized. Robert Shellow, head of social science research for the commission, pointed out to a high-level staff person, "It's going to be awfully difficult to mount a study of the riots using social science methodology and compress it into four or five months." He was told, "That's not important ... what's important is that you've got that Ph.D. "

25. Irving Louis Horowitz, "Black Sociology," *Trans-action*, September, 19 p. 7-8.