Why did Lyndon B. Johnson not Initially Welcome the Kerner Commission?

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Abstract

This thesis explores the importance of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (commonly referred to as the Kerner Commission after its chairman, Otto Kerner). It seeks to answer why President Lyndon B. Johnson initially did not welcome the commission. The report made headlines upon its publication in 1968 for its conclusive condemnation of white racism being behind the riots of the long, hot summer of 1967. The final report also made several recommendations to improve the lives of black Americans who were stuck living in impoverished conditions within America's inner cities. However, the report did not conclusively lead to lasting changes, and the commissioner's warnings would go unheeded.

Lyndon Johnson did not welcome the commission and maintained a public silence for three weeks after the report was published. The report sold well and was debated in Congress. However, feeling he could not act on the commission's suggestions, Johnson remained distant and privately ranted about a commission in which he had long since lost interest in. Johnson's silence was also due to the perceived lack of credit the report gave him, as he demonstrated he had a complex personality and felt he had not received adequate praise. Other factors also included the Vietnam War absorbing Johnson's efforts and budget, which meant the Kerner Report took its place in history as a critical document in the final months of the Johnson administration.

Furthermore, the commission served as a reminder of Johnson's declining relationships with Congress and inability to win over the people he needed to attempt implementing the commission's suggestions.

Concluding that a combination of all these factors trapped Johnson into inaction, this thesis seeks to add a new perspective to the historiography of the Kerner Commission. This dissertation considers why Johnson's personality, the Vietnam War, his relationships with other politicians, the problems with the commission itself, the issues with his Great Society programmes, and racial backlash all combined to undermine the president and his commission. Johnson felt the weight of history with his commission. This thesis answers why he struggled so much and why his presidency slipped away in March 1968, culminating in his withdrawal from the election on 31st March 1968.

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Why did Lyndon B. Johnson not Initially Welcome the Kerner Commission?

Introduction

The race riots that engulfed the cities of the United States in the summer of 1967 signalled that a new era in the quest for civil rights had arrived. A single incident of brutality and repression often triggered the violence that caused death and destruction in many inner-city ghettos. On 24th July, as he sent federal troops into Detroit, MI, to calm the violence, President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) spoke to the nation. Director of the FBI J. Edgar Hoover, Attorney General Ramsey Clark, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, among others, flanked the president as he sent a message that, "Pillage, looting, murder and arson have nothing to do with civil rights."[1] Soon after, Johnson faced the enormous challenge of preventing future riots. In order to balance the competing versions of events, he wanted to be seen as a defender of law and order and to display genuine compassion for those who lived in the destitute and impoverished conditions of the urban ghettos.[2]

The same internal battles that troubled Johnson were also playing out in Congress. On one side, liberal members of Congress strived to do something about the appalling quality of life for black Americans in the urban ghettos. Senators Fred Harris (D-OK) and Walter Mondale (D-MN) were starting their push for a presidential commission to investigate the causes of the riots; those who were even further left-leaning, such as Senators Robert F. Kennedy (D-NY) and Abraham Ribicoff (D-CT), wanted action.[3] On the conservative right, focusing on "law and order" quickly became the dominant political message for politicians in Congress and around the nation. With a weakened position exacerbated by the Vietnam War and losses in the 1966 mid-term elections, Johnson faced

[1] Lyndon B. Johnson, "President Johnson made Remarks to the Nation After Authorising the Use of Federal Troops in Detroit," transcript of speech delivered at Washington, D.C., 24th July, 1967, LBJ Presidential Library | Research (lbjlibrary.net). Accessed 7th June 2023.
[2] Robert, Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 415-16.
[3] Fred R. Harris, interview by Roberta W. Greene, 29th July 1970, RFKOH-FRH-01 Fred R. Harris Oral History Interview – RFK#1, transcript, Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Collection. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Harris, Fred R.: Oral History Interview - RFK #1, 7/29/1970 | JFK Library. Accessed 7th June 2023.

a significant problem in deciding what action to take on the riots. His choices had far-reaching implications for himself, his presidency, and American race relations.

The riots were the result of continually strained race relations. Many issues remained unresolved despite the triumphs of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Legislation alone could not solve these problems. There were still significant inequalities in housing, employment, and income. These issues were most prevalent in urban inner cities. Black Americans disproportionately inhabited these areas and thus were forced to live in more dilapidated housing and struggled to find well-paid employment. Johnson had recognised the task that needed completing, telling graduating students at Howard University in 1965 of the problem that faced many black Americans, "Despite the legislative victories and the speeches, for them the walls are rising and the gulf is widening."[4] The events that followed his speech would only confirm that Johnson was correct. The violence would start in the summer of 1965, and consequently, the Detroit riot of 1967 convinced him that he needed to act.

The president's solution to the problem of the cities and the disorder was to establish a presidential commission. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (commonly referred to by the name of its chairman, Otto Kerner) was speedily put in place as the demanding president summoned its members from all over the United States. The whole process was completed with Johnson's typical speed and intensity as he pressured his chosen committee members into serving. On 28th July 1967, with his team assembled, Johnson posed three questions to his self-appointed commissioners in an initial executive order, "What Happened," "Why did it happen" and "What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?"[5] Kerner, the Democratic Governor of

[4] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks at the Howard University Commencement," transcript of speech delivered at Howard University Washington, D.C., 4th June 1965, June 4, 1965: Remarks at the Howard University Commencement | Miller Center. Accessed 7th June 2023.

[5] Lyndon B. Johnson, Statement By the President, "Executive Order 11365, establishment of Kerner Commission, July 29, 1967," Folder: 001346-016-0833, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-016-0833&accountid=7408. Accessed 18th June 2023.

Illinois, led the commission's bi-partisan, eleven-member panel as chairman. John Lindsay, the Republican Mayor of New York City, served as vice chair. The commission featured members of Congress, including Harris as well as fellow Senator Edward Brooke (R-MA), Representatives James Corman (D-CA), and William McCulloch (R-OH). Johnson's commission also counted among its members Iorwith Wilbur (I.W.) Abel, the President of the United Steelworkers of America (AFL-CIO); Texas businessman Charles B. "Tex" Thornton; Roy Wilkins, the Executive Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Katherine Peden, the Kentucky Commissioner of Commerce and Herbert Jenkins, the Chief of Police for Atlanta, GA.

The commissioners were all distinguished in their various fields. For example, Jenkins held the respect of his fellow commissioners, regardless of whether they were conservative or liberal, for his effective policing of Atlanta. Jenkins was a rarity, a white, southern police chief who was in favour of civil rights.[6] However, the group could have been more representative. Firstly, the commission had no representation from ghetto inhabitants and no church or black community leaders from any major city. Furthermore, Peden was the sole female delegate. Whilst the commission had black members in Brooke and Wilkins, Brooke was a relatively moderate Republican, and the influence of Wilkins and the NAACP was far weaker than it had been just a few years prior. Significantly, the radical views or the opinions of young people did not have a voice on the commission, nor did any advocate for black nationalism.[7] The one thing the commissioners had in common was that Johnson chose them. Thus, the commission was set up exactly as he intended; there is little doubt that its early implementation and complexion were entirely the president's doing.

Regardless, Johnson would reject his commission's finished work. In this work, the reasons for Johnson's initial rejection are explored. Several contextual factors are vital to understanding Johnson's initial and later reactions to the Kerner Report. The first of these factors is Johnson

[6] Steven M. Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 52.
[7] Ibid., XI.

himself. Lyndon Johnson was a complicated personality and a brilliant political operator who left a massive mark on 20th century American history. The second factor was the event in Johnson's presidency that defined his historical place – the Vietnam War. With 1967 being the year a more conservative Congress was sworn in and 1968 being an election year, party politics also shaped Johnson's thoughts on the commission throughout its lifespan. In addition, the riots emboldened conservatives and those opposed to civil rights. Reactionaries used the riots as an excuse to attack Johnson over his domestic agenda. The riots were seen as further evidence of a decline in "law and order." The final factor was the impact of segregation. Left unsolved despite Johnson's vast civil rights achievements, segregation created an environment that helped determine the president's reaction. All of these factors led to the central argument of this thesis that Johnson felt he was trapped and could do little of what the commission wanted him to do.

Immediately after the commission's founding, many of Johnson's inner circle and liberals needed convincing regarding his committee. His chief domestic advisor, Joseph Califano, Jr., remarked, "The cities are aflame, the country's coming apart, LBJ cannot get a tax bill, so what does he do? Set up a commission and say a prayer."[8] As Harris observed in his oral history account, Johnson's political rivals were not expecting much from the commission; he recalled Robert Kennedy (RFK) not thinking "it was going to amount to anything."[9] Harris noted that what Kennedy and fellow liberal Ribicoff wanted to see "was action, not study."[10] Civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. were equally sceptical. King's concern was the representativeness of the commission; in Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recordings, King is documented to have said, "I have found a mood in

[8] Joseph A. Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years,* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 217.
[9] Harris, RFKOH-FRH-01 Fred R. Harris Oral History Interview – RFK#1.
[10] Ibid.

the Negro community that this panel will do nothing that there are not enough Negroes on it and no Negro militants."[11]

The commission was seen as an easy way for Johnson to be decisive with his diminished political powers. A presidential commission is entrusted with very little real power and seldom leads to lasting political action. A lot needed to happen before laws could be formed based on the Kerner Commission's findings. As Hugh Davis Graham observed, presidential commissions were subject to the whims of Congress due to the separation of powers built into America's constitution.[12] A commission can make any recommendations, but the legislative branch of government will scrutinise its findings. However, Johnson was satisfied with his plan and sent his commissioners to riot-affected cities such as Detroit and Newark, NJ. He was determined that this commission would yield a result he would be pleased with, unlike The President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy (Warren Commission). Historically, presidential commissions have often held an investigative function. With subsequent historical context, the Warren Commission's divisive conclusions were seen as the start of presidential commissions being greeted with "traditional cynicism."[13]

Nevertheless, determined to get a piece of research that satisfied him, the president appointed commissioners he believed would champion his Great Society programmes and deliver a pragmatic rebuke to his opponents. The Great Society was the collective name given to Johnson's domestic agenda, and its scale was of a level not seen since President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New

[11] "FBI Surveillance of Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC via surveillance of home telephone of King adviser Stanley Levison, July 27, 1967-July 31, 1967," 29th July 1967, Folder: 001607-007-0462, Surveillance of Telephones in Stanley Levison's Residence, Martin Luther King Jr. FBI File, Part 2: The King-Levison File, Federal Bureau of Investigation, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001607-007-0462&accountid=7408. Accessed 11th June 2023.
[12] Hugh Davis Graham, "The Ambiguous legacy of American Presidential Commissions," *The Public Historian* 7, no.2 (Spring 1985): 8, The Ambiguous Legacy of American Presidential Commissions on JSTOR (kent.ac.uk). accessed 30th July 2023.
[13] Hugh Davis Graham, "On Riots and Riot Commisions: Civil Disorders in the 1960s," *The Public Historian* 2, no.4 (Summer 1980): 12, On Riots and Riot Commisions: Civil Disorders in the 1960s on JSTOR (kent.ac.uk). accessed 30th July 2023.

Deal. It featured legislation designed to combat poverty, fight inequality, improve the environment, and provide health care to the elderly and poor. With his civil rights programmes, Medicare and Medicaid (Social Security Act of 1965), Lyndon Johnson had firmly enshrined himself in history. However, his War on Poverty had far more mixed results, and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO established with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964) was controversial. Therefore, the Economic Opportunity Act typified Johnson's anti-poverty agenda. When historians assess Johnson's War on Poverty, their opinions vary. Edward Schmitt said Johnson's efforts to defeat poverty "would exacerbate divisions between parties, regions, and races in America."[14] Of his work, Johnson admitted, "We had not lifted everyone out of poverty."[15] Nevertheless, he remained proud of his achievements and maintained, "We started something in motion with the attack on poverty."[16] Therefore, in his commission, Johnson had entrusted his pride and belief in the achievements of his domestic agenda.

When chosen, the eleven commissioners underwhelmed liberals as they were primarily made up of those whom Johnson hoped would be moderates who would support his domestic agenda and pay tribute to the administration's remarkable progress under the president's leadership. Steven Gillon observed that the commission members were "mainstream bipartisan figures."[17] Furthermore, Johnson had hoped for a commission that, as a whole, could have drowned out the louder liberal voices on it, such as John Lindsay. The commission notably featured his personal friends, such as Peden and Thornton. Peden, in particular, was chosen to boost her credentials ahead of a run for the United States Senate. Businessman Thornton can rightly be considered the commission's most conservative appointee. He had also been a friend and mentor of Robert McNamara. Additionally, Kerner had a moderate record as governor. However, the story did

[14] Edward R. Schmitt, "The War on Poverty," in *A Companion to Lyndon Johnson*, ed. Mitchell B. Lerner (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 93.
[15] Lyndon B. Johnson, *Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (London: Redwood Press Limited, 1971), 87.
[16] Ibid., 87.
[17] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, XI.

not turn out the way Johnson intended. He had planned that Thornton, Peden, and Kerner would moderate and balance debates. Unfortunately for the president, thinking that his more conservative appointees could act as a counter was a mistake. Several commissioners, notably Harris and Lindsay, stood out throughout meetings as more liberal and pulled the conclusions to the left.

The commission's conclusion, officially disclosed to the public on 1st March 1968, reflected a brave and liberal direction. The final summary featured a startling assessment: "Our Nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal."[18] These words were the work of the liberal members of the commission, especially Lindsay and Harris. The terminology would have drawn attention back to the *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka (KS) of* 1954 Supreme Court decision that effectively ruled separate school facilities for black and white children were unconstitutional, overruling *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896. Tellingly, Lindsay's aides produced the "Our nation…" line.[19] The commission's answers to Johnson's questions were not what the pragmatic president wanted. The commission blamed white racism for the ills of the ghetto, as it set forth an argument of self-reproach for white Americans with some harsh conclusions. The report declared:

> "Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment unknown to most white Americans.
>
> What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the Negro can never forget is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."[20]

[18] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," Washington, D.C.: United States, 1968, edited by Sean Wilentz, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1.
[19] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, 241.
[20] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 2.

To supplement its hard-hitting conclusion, the commission created a road map with a series of suggestions for avoiding the split into two societies. Moreover, it also sought to heal the damage already done. The commissioners and their staff conducted numerous interviews and visits to nationwide riot-affected cities to produce its final report. The commission called for "a greatly enlarged commitment to national action – compassionate, massive and sustained, backed by the will and resources of the most powerful and the richest nation on this earth."[21] The commissioners had hoped that such a wake-up call to Americans would help fulfil their ambitions.

Accordingly, the report's final chapter laid out a series of national strategies based on employment, education, welfare, and housing.[22] Moreover, the commission proposed three more general objectives. The first was to aid those that segregation and discrimination affected. It advocated removing "all barriers to their choice of jobs, education and housing."[23] Secondly, the commission sought to give the same people "the means to deal with their own problems that affect their own lives and by increasing the capacity of our public and private institutions to respond to these problems."[24] Thirdly, the report committed to "communication across racial lines to destroy stereotypes."[25] To counter anticipated attacks from advocates of "law and order" and those who justified the riots, the commission pledged, "Our strategy is neither blind repression nor capitulation to lawlessness."[26] As a result, these promises formed the backbone of the commission's recommendations.

Employment was the first area in which the commission outlined its recommendations. Their aims were ambitious. They called for the creation of one million public and one million private sector jobs, encouragement of "business ownership in the ghetto", the opening up of "the existing job

[21] Ibid., 410.
[22] Ibid., 413-477.
[23] Ibid., 413.
[24] Ibid., 413.
[25] Ibid., 413.
[26] Ibid., 413.

structure," and the development of areas that "urban and rural poverty" had blighted.[27] These aims were perhaps the most audacious as the United States economy battled inflation, and congressional deficit hawks pressured Johnson to control spending on the vast numbers of pre-existing Great Society programmes.

The commission's recommendations on education centred on efforts to combat segregation. The report observed: "The vast majority of inner-city schools are rigidly segregated."[28] The U.S Commission on Civil Rights surveyed 75 American cities and found that, "Almost 90 percent of all Negro students attended schools which had a majority of Negro students. In the same cities, 83 percent of all white students in those grades attended schools with 90 to 100 percent white enrolments."[29] To tackle such discrimination, the commission knew it had to undertake "efforts to eliminate *de facto* segregation."[30] *De facto* segregation was widespread across the United States at the time of the commission's publication, after eighty years of Jim Crow laws that had reinforced *de jure* segregation throughout much of the country. Acknowledging *de facto* segregation, which was a contributory factor in the oppression of the cities, was a crucial step for the commission, albeit it only scratched the surface of the problem.

The commission's third recommended area for action was the welfare system, which it believed "contributes materially to the tensions and social disorganisation that have led to civil disorders."[31] The commission's work on this area offered a point of difference with the Johnson administration's positions. The language the commission used to describe the scale of the effort required offered an implicit criticism of the Great Society's numerous programmes. The Great Society proposed government as a solution; the commission argued, "Existing welfare programs are a labyrinth of Federal, state, and local legislation."[32] In addition, the commission acknowledged the

[27] Ibid., 417.
[28] Ibid., 425.
[29] Ibid., 425.
[30] Ibid., 438.
[31] Ibid., 453.
[32] Ibid., 453.

issues with the existing welfare support and called for "drastic reforms."[33] Alongside the suggestion for improved employment programmes, the commission had not factored in the lack of funding for "overhauling the present system."[34]

Finally, the commission sought to alleviate the inequalities experienced in housing. Among the commission's findings were the poor housing conditions for many black Americans; for example, in Cambridge, MD, approximately 75% of black Americans lived in substandard housing.[35] In Detroit, which saw the worst riots, the situation was just as dire, "Along 12th street itself overcrowded apartment houses created a density of more than 21,000 persons per square mile, almost double the city average. Only 18 percent of the residents were homeowners. Twenty-five percent of the housing was considered so sub-standard as to require clearance, and another 19 percent had major deficiencies."[36] In another city the commission visited, Milwaukee, WI, the commission found that most ghetto housing units were in converted old houses.[37] The commissioners advocated for plans to analyse or change housing and building codes. They also pressed for improvements to the existing housing stock. The subject of housing would lead to the most ambitious strategies of all. The commission wanted the "provision of 600,000 low – and moderate-income housing units next year,

[33] Ibid., 453.
[34] Ibid., 458.
[35] "Kerner Commission trip to Cambridge, Maryland, August 31, 1967," 31st August 1967, Folder: 001346-016-0279, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-016-0279&accountid=7408. Accessed on 18th June 2023.
[36] "Final City Profile, Detroit, Michigan, Kerner Commission files," 27th July 1967, Folder: 001346-027-0022, Subject Files of Robert Conot [Series 59], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-027-0022&accountid=7408. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[37] "Milwaukee, Wisconsin, trip by Kerner Commission representatives, September 26, 1967," 26th September 1967, Folder: 001346-017-0911, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-017-0911&accountid=7408. Accessed on 18th June 2023.

and six million units over the next five years."[38] Further pledges included an expansion to existing Great Society legislation, the Model Cities programme, an expansion of rent supplement schemes, an enlarged public housing initiative, the allocation of low-income housing outside of the inner-city ghettos, and changes to outdated building codes.[39] Model Cities was the Johnson administration's programme to provide additional funding for American cities to regenerate facilities and amenities. It came with a price point of roughly $900 million.[40] Unquestionably, any expansion would have proved difficult as the president had struggled to pass and get funding for the Model Cities programme as it existed at that moment. Many of the other programmes were also far from realistic.

From these grandiose objectives, the commission had created a list of a liberal's vision for American cities. The final report gave the American people a wake-up call. It was clear to everyone who read the report that the problems of the inner-city ghettos were deep-rooted and required a long and sustained push to address. It offered forthright answers to many of the challenges the ghetto inhabitants faced. As a *New York Times* editorial from 3rd March 1968 observed, "The report placed a burden on every white American, from the President to the cop on the beat to the ordinary citizen."[41]

No one felt the weight of the commission's answers more than the man who ordered its creation, Johnson himself. Johnson's engagement with the report, or the lack thereof, as the civil-rights president told a story in and of itself. Johnson greeted the report with public silence. After years of summer riots, his fears and paranoia affected him. Subsequently, due to the report, he was forced to accept that even his most significant achievements were – as they still are today – not

[38] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 471.
[39] Ibid., 471.
[40] Julian E. Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society,* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 227.
[41] "Race Relations 'Separate and Unequal,'" *New York Times,* 3rd March 1968, 201. TimesMachine: March 3, 1968 - NYTimes.com. Accessed on 15th September 2023.

enough to eradicate racism or poverty. The Kerner Report made Johnson feel the weight of history. By early 1968, he could not take the necessary steps to continue his remarkable civil rights successes. Johnson was in a difficult position.

Historians have focussed on three reasons why Johnson did not accept his commission's responses. These were money, alienation of the white majority, and his personality. All these factors have substantial evidence found in primary accounts and documentation from the period. This thesis utilises the records of the Kerner Commission to understand their conclusions. In addition to the Johnson phone calls, the commission's files give a unique insight into their work. The records of Congress enable analysis of congressional responses and how conservatives and liberals possessed conflicting narratives to Johnson's. Furthermore, Johnson's list of political opponents had grown large when the commission was produced. Some loyal to Robert Kennedy gave fascinating oral history accounts that discussed what they saw as Johnson's failure to act on the commission. Overall, this thesis uses these collections to offer a new perspective on the Kerner Commission, which looks at the importance of Johnson's viewpoints and the report's message. The thesis utilises the records to understand how Johnson, his fellow politicians, and the public reacted to the commission. The objective is to discern the reasons why Johnson responded as he did.

Ultimately, whether or not to push the commission after its publication fell to Johnson; his verdict decided whether the commission was a success or a failure. Johnson's response was somewhat muted in public, but his mood swung wildly in private. Fortuitously, many of Johnson's phone calls were recorded, so these private views were captured. His phone calls and the interactions with the politicians, public servants, and friends he spoke to capture his true feelings and consternations regarding the commission. Dissecting these conversations is vital for understanding the president's mind and why he interpreted the commission's answers and propositions the way he did. In addition, these sources contextualise historians' arguments. They

also add to their points due to the insight they provide into Johnson's views. A pattern is seen in the differences between his public and private responses.

Many of these phone conversations have been newly released for the public and historians to examine them and their meanings. Jeremi Suri said of Johnson's phone calls, "Listening to Johnson on the phone, one hears more hectoring, pleading, and horse-trading than one might expect, given the aura of the office."[42] Furthermore, Mark Atwood Lawrence believed that the recordings created a situation where "it became possible to appreciate Johnson with unprecedented nuance and complexity."[43] In looking at Lyndon Johnson's mindset, this dissertation contributes to the historiography concerning the Kerner Commission. The conversations show why Johnson first rejected the report and then, weeks after, when it was too late, offered a reluctant acceptance of its conclusions. The insight from Johnson's advisors enables historians to build a picture of why the president made the choices he did. In particular, Califano is important as, at the time of the commission's work, he "stood out as first among equals."[44] Oral history accounts from members of the commission show they discussed their opinions on Johnson's reaction and why they thought he acted as he did.

The historiography on the Kerner Commission generally concluded that the commission was a liberal document that promised much that it could not deliver. Its historical significance and the lessons it has to teach 21st-century America are often forgotten or not expanded upon in significant detail. For instance, renowned presidential historian Robert Dallek effectively summarised the Kerner Commission in his biography of Johnson's vice presidency and presidency. He concluded that the president's reaction was "ambivalent."[45] Political historian Irving Bernstein's account of the

[42] Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office*, (New York: Basic Books, 2017), xvi.
[43] Mark Atwood Lawrence, "Introduction," in *LBJ'S America: The Life and Legacies of Lyndon Baines Johnson,* eds.Mark Atwood Lawrence and Mark K. Updegrove, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024), 7.
[44] Joshua Zeitz, *Building the Great Society: inside Lyndon Johnson's White House,* (New York: Viking, 2018), 60.
[45] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 516.

Johnson administration, *Guns or Butter*, scarcely mentioned the Kerner Commission, so he does not explore its significance in greater detail.[46]

Therefore, there is a gap in the historiography of the Johnson era concerning the importance of the Kerner Report, which this thesis seeks to address. Moreover, a comparatively small number of the historical accounts of the commission primarily focus on Johnson himself as a reason for its failure and why the commission's suggestions trapped him. The accounts conclude that the report was not acted upon due to the spending restrictions in Congress. While valid, Johnson's involvement should get more attention. In a few accounts, little attention is paid to Johnson's animosity and how this changed over time. Even fewer consider the effect of Johnson's personality and mentality when reviewing why the commission was left to become a footnote to history or a few lines in the biographies of Johnson. Johnson's impact on his commission is a significant gap in the historiography of racism and its effects in the United States in the civil rights era. This thesis fills that gap. It reconsiders Johnson's reaction to the report and how his engagement contributed to the Kerner Commission's historiography.

Historians accept Johnson's conclusions that his lack of money limited his chances of success with further domestic commitments whilst his soldiers were bogged down in the quagmire of Vietnam. David Carter observed, "For President Johnson, the Kerner Commission Report could not have arrived at a less auspicious moment. Stymied in his attempts to win passage of a tax bill, increasingly worried by the threat of runaway inflation, and as always distracted by the morass of Vietnam, LBJ felt like even the preservation of existing Great Society programs would be an uphill

[46] Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 388,417-419.

battle."[47] For these historians, the report was ambitious but ultimately impractical or, as Steven Gillon noted, it "represented the last gasp of 1960s liberalism."[48]

Other historians highlight Johnson's concern that the commission alienated vital Democratic voting blocs, saying the president was "aghast at the Kerner Commission report."[49] Where historians do discuss Johnson's personal views, they agree that the president was aggrieved at the report not giving him enough credit and was instead unrealistic. Julian Zelizer wrote an introduction to the 2016 version of the Kerner Commission that included his thoughts on Johnson's reactions: "The president felt that the report had not given sufficient credit to his Great Society for alleviating racial inequality and that it called for programmes, such as higher taxes that were politically impossible."[50] Dallek agreed with such sentiments: "The commission's conclusions and proposals incensed him – a combination of personal pique and political realism."[51] However, Johnson's changing attitudes about the commission's findings and undoubted commitment to domestic racial solidarity should also be studied.

The historiography of the commission is not limited to discussion of the commission itself. Race relations, intra and inter-party politics, and the conflict in Vietnam all contextualise the commission. Thus, the commission cannot be studied effectively without considering the impact of these factors on the committee's work and conclusions. Susan Gooden and Samuel Myers state that the report introduced the idea of widespread, institutionalised racism to mainstream American society.[52] Ultimately, this challenged the New Deal coalition, which had existed in the United States

[47] David C. Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration,* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 227. U.S. Presidential Library - HeinOnline.org, Accessed on 11th June 2023.
[48] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, xiv.
[49] Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 240.
[50] Julian E. Zelizer, "Introduction to the 2016 Edition." In *The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,* Ed. Sean Wilentz, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), xxxii.
[51] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 516.
[52] Susan T. Gooden and Samuel L. Myers, "The Kerner Commission Report Fifty Years Later: Revisiting the American Dream." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no.6 (September 2018): 2,

since the early 1930s. The group, loosely consisting of white Southerners, black Americans, and Northern liberals, had been the core of Democratic voters since the New Deal under Johnson's political hero Franklin Roosevelt. As David Steigerwald observed, "The Kerner Report intensified the differences between conservatives, progressives and the centrist administration."[53]

To examine the Kerner Commission, the political, social, and economic foundations of the United States from 1967 through to 1968 must be understood. Johnson was at the forefront of every one of these factors. As it is true that behind most aspects of Lyndon Johnson's presidency was the Vietnam War, it is also true that behind every part of the Kerner Commission was Lyndon Johnson. The president loomed over the commission. His initial, medium, and longer-term reactions tell a tragic but human story. In studying the aspects of Johnson's personality that the war brought to the forefront of his mind, his views on the commission and what it represented are better understood. His decisions would have lasting ramifications. Hence, it is essential to know why he made his choices. Johnson was a man of many contradictions, evident from how he treated his commission. Analysing the president through his own words, those of his allies, and his critics in Congress helps answer the question of why, at first, Johnson did not accept the Kerner Commission. This thesis focuses on Johnson's reaction and contributes something different than the existing historiography.

Furthermore, this thesis argues that Johnson was under immense external political pressures, which explained his reaction. The Great Society had run its course, conservatives circled, and middle America had become disillusioned with liberalism. Johnson managed the questions over the commission as he tried to balance keeping his ailing administration afloat through a war with supporting another expansive legislative push. Ultimately, he could not and did not seek a balance. He chose the former and sought to preserve his presidency.

The Kerner Commission Report Fifty Years Later: Revisiting the American Dream (rsfjournal.org). Accessed 11th June 2023.

[53] David Steigerwald, "The Urban Crisis," in *A Companion to Lyndon Johnson*, ed. Mitchell B. Lerner (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 257.

The Man Behind the Commission: Lyndon B. Johnson

Before he would go on to establish the commission, Lyndon Johnson had climbed to the office of president in a remarkable and unlikely manner. His rise was gradual, but he skilfully navigated the political ladder and dedicated his life to pursuing his ultimate goal – the White House. From adolescence, Johnson spoke to others he worked with in a road gang and told them he would be president.[54] Nevertheless, he never publicly acknowledged this goal once he started that climb to the nation's highest office.[55] Despite this, those in Johnson's orbit knew what his objective was.[56] He began his political ascent as a legislative secretary in Washington for Congressman Richard Kleberg (D-TX) in 1931, establishing New Deal credentials when he was appointed head of the Texas National Youth Administration in 1935. Johnson was elected to the House of Representatives in 1937 in a special election and remained a staunch ally of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal. He enrolled in the naval reserve in 1940, as he was convinced that further political progress depended on some degree of military participation in a war many believed was inevitable. Indeed, Johnson saw active service in World War II and received the Silver Star decoration for his role as an observer on a doomed bombing mission; his plane was hit before it reached its intended target and was forced to return to base.

After the war, Johnson continued what he believed would be his destined rise and won a controversial nomination for the Senate in 1948. This nomination earned him the sarcastic nickname of "Landslide Lyndon." It was in the Senate where Johnson's power grew, as he carefully cultivated the support of the old guard of Southern senators such as Richard Russell (D-GA), which resulted in Johnson becoming the Senate's Minority Leader in 1953. After the Democrats took control of the Senate in 1954, he became the Majority Leader. There, he was careful not to upset his support base

[54] Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson,* vol. 3*, Master of the Senate,* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 110-111.
[55] Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson,* vol. 2*, The Means of Ascent,* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 3.
[56] Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 111.

whilst laying the groundwork for his future presidential run. For instance, he refused to sign the Southern Manifesto that had attacked the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. His dealings, as he worked to appease his fellow Southern senators, helped secure the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act. These machinations limited the law's power as Johnson made concessions to Southerners, leaving the Act unenforceable in the South. However, it had filled its purpose for Johnson: the effort was designed to shore up support ahead of a presidential bid.

Nevertheless, unfortunately for Johnson, his backroom dealings and political machinations were not enough to secure him the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination. With the prize he had sought seemingly gone forever, Johnson was John F. Kennedy's (JFK) surprise pick for vice president, helping the then Massachusetts senator win critical states in the South to take him to victory. His time in the Kennedy administration was unhappy; the power he once had as majority leader was gone, and his service was dutiful if begrudging as a number two. On 22nd November 1963, everything was reversed. Kennedy was assassinated, and those in the Kennedy administration who had mocked him had to call him "Mr. President."

Johnson had served in every federal elected office, being the first president to do so. Although steady at first, his rise to power was meteoric when he reached the Senate as he focused on pursuing his dream job- the presidency. However, this came at a cost. He was a solely political personality. Johnson's single-mindedness is demonstrated in his choice of hobbies – he had none outside of the detailed micro-management of his Texas ranch; moreover, "He was obsessed with politics and cared about almost nothing else – literature, art, music, sports."[57] Bernstein recorded one example, after throwing out the opening pitch at the Washington Senators' opening match, Johnson neglected the on-field events and talked politics with those in his entourage.[58] He lived and

[57] Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* 539.
[58] Ibid.

breathed politics; thus, he could not comprehend issues that required solutions outside of legislative victories.

The Commission in Context: Vietnam

The Kerner Commission's final report and the racial disunity were far from the only factors that weighed heavy upon Johnson's mind. The country was divided on significant issues, most notably the Vietnam War. No discussion concerning the Johnson administration is comprehensive without acknowledging that the war overshadowed the president's best efforts. Johnson committed large numbers of forces to Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed in 1964. As a result, over the next four years, he was forced to contend with widespread criticism of his management of the war effort. Throughout his presidency, he engaged in a campaign of deceit to cover the severity and price of the war. Thus, he dug himself and the United States deeper into the mire. The worst came in 1968. Launched on 30th January, the Tet Offensive was a catalyst to expose the so-called "credibility gap" between how Johnson portrayed the war and what Americans could see on their televisions every night. The North Vietnamese attack on the Tet holiday undermined the president. Until Tet, Johnson had publicly insisted that victory and self-determination for South Vietnam were inevitable despite evidence to the contrary and his private concerns. On 29th September 1967, just over three months before the Tet Offensive, Johnson had painted a rosy picture of the situation in a speech in San Antonio, TX: "The campaigns of the last year drove the enemy from many of their major interior bases. The military victory almost within Hanoi's grasp in 1965 has now been denied them. The grip of the Vietcong on the people is being broken."[59] Johnson remained committed to his San Antonio objectives two weeks before Tet in his State of the Union Address on 17th January 1968.[60] Despite the Tet Offensive being a military failure for the North Vietnamese, it had a

[59] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Speech on Vietnam," transcript of speech delivered before the National Legislative Conference, San Antonio, TX., 29th September 1967, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-vietnam-before-the-national-legislative-conference-san-antonio-texas. Accessed 7th June 2023.
[60] Lyndon B. Johnson, "State of the Union Address," transcript of speech delivered at Washington, D.C. 17th January 1968, January 17, 1968: State of the Union Address | Miller Center. Accessed on 15th September 2023.

devastating political effect on Johnson, one from which he could not recover. To many in the United States, it also proved that the war was unwinnable.

Francis M. Bator served as Johnson's Deputy National Security Advisor, primarily responsible for European affairs. In his analysis of Johnson's commitment to Vietnam in 1965, Bator purported that Johnson believed he was in an impossible position and needed to commit to fighting in Vietnam or risk the wrath of hawks and the military that would derail any chance his domestic agenda had of passing.[61] Bator stated that Johnson "would bet the store to get his domestic legislation through."[62] Bator knew from his time in the Johnson administration that the stereotypical view of Johnson being unable to comprehend foreign policy or that the generals and McNamara drove him to the decision to escalate the war was a fallacy.[63] McNamara agreed and argued that Johnson possessed a great deal of knowledge about Vietnam and sought to educate himself immediately upon assuming office.[64] McNamara reached the same conclusion as Bator did years later: Johnson was concerned about losing support for domestic programmes if he showed weakness in Vietnam.[65]

Thus, the Vietnam conflict was Lyndon Johnson's war, and it absorbed much of his time; it was also a significant expense. The war's cost limited Johnson's room for political manoeuvring. The war clearly distracted him and forced him to increasingly move his efforts away from the Great Society. Furthermore, the monetary costs of fighting the war ran into the tens of billions. Consequently, this alarmed Congress, who were reluctant to engage in spending on any major new domestic programmes whilst the war continued.[66] As with other programmes in Johnson's sweeping Great Society reforms, the decreased spending power of the president can be seen in the reaction to the Kerner Commission. Fundamentally, the war turned into an obsession for him that bought out

[61] Francis M. Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 3 (June 2008): 334, No Job Name (ebscohost.com). accessed 11th June 2023.
[62] Ibid., 337.
[63] Ibid., 339.
[64] Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam,* (New York, Vintage Books, 1996), 101-102.
[65] Ibid., 102.
[66] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, 272.

his worst character traits. How Johnson handled the conflict, and the lack of disclosure he gave to the American people reinforced the ever-declining situation he found himself in since he committed the United States to a land war. It opened him up to criticism from the right and left, conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats. In addition, the war took a considerable toll on Johnson's mental health as he weighed the loss of American lives.

The Commission in Context: Party Politics and a Conservative Resurgence

The Democratic Party underwent a significant shift in the 1960s, as the New Deal coalition that had formed the basis of the party for years as a formidable electoral bloc weakened. The push for civil rights alienated the South, whereas the declining pace of domestic reforms and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam split Johnson from black Americans and liberals. Many "Dixiecrats" of the South switched political allegiance, and in 1968, George Wallace (who in 1968 was First Gentleman of Alabama and the former Governor of Alabama) launched a long-shot but still strong bid for the White House under the banner of the new American Independent Party. Most of these "Dixiecrats" were dissatisfied with their party's direction on race. In their eyes, the Kerner Commission was another example of the Johnson administration's neglect of states' rights. Conservative reactionaries had started to attract large amounts of public support.

Meanwhile, liberals wanted more concrete action from the president, the likes of which the commission advocated. However, over Vietnam, Johnson lost the support of those he needed the most; the Democratic Party was divided into hawks, who wanted the president to take action to end the war in victory, and doves, who questioned its legality and morality. A rebellion among Democrats was built against their leader; those who pushed for peace led the movement. Unsurprisingly, Johnson faced a challenge for his job. Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-MN) and the man Johnson reserved a particular dislike for, Robert Kennedy, both sought the 1968 Democratic nomination. The Kerner Commission became a further test of Johnson's place at the head of the

party. Thus, he grappled with how to handle the commission whilst dealing with his detractors' criticisms.

Congressional hearings demonstrated the battle at the heart of the Democratic Party over the commission and the direction of liberalism under Johnson. The party's fracturing and the president's weakness demonstrated the lack of cohesion and leadership at the top. The views of politicians further emphasised how divided the response to the commission proved to be. In congressional testimonies, liberals of both parties who advocated for the commission were shocked at Johnson's silence and called for more to be done. Moderates of both parties acknowledged that the commission's central message of racism was poignant but worried about the costs. Finally, reactionaries of both parties slammed the commission for being seen to be rewarding rioters, demurred at the anticipated price tag, ignored racism, and asked where the support was for white Americans. Congressional hearings established the discourse over the commission and between political ideologies.

Johnson received no further assistance from the Republican Party. The president was able to turn to Senator Everett Dirksen (R-IL) when he needed help in breaking a "Dixiecrat" led filibuster to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However, he got very few domestic favours from Republicans in Congress when the commission was in the public discourse. For the Republican Party, the Kerner Commission was the latest test as it sought to rebrand itself and capture the votes from the conservative right of American society. Beginning in 1960, growing elements of the Republican Party had started to seek winning votes in the former Confederacy from those who were opposed to a liberal agenda on civil rights.[67] For fiscal conservatives, the exorbitant price tags attached to further social spending programmes were prohibitive for significant action. In addition, the 1968 election started to look very winnable from a Republican perspective, and the antithesis of many of the

[67] Tim Galsworthy, "Carpetbaggers, Confederates, and Richard Nixon: The 1960 Presidential Election, Historical Memory and the Republican Southern Strategy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 52, no.2 (June 2022): 266-271. Carpetbaggers, Confederates, and Richard Nixon: The 1960 Presidential Election, Historical Memory, and the Republican Southern Strategy (wiley.com). Accessed on 3rd February 2024.

Kerner Commission's proposals would form the backbone of their message. The Republican campaign would target many suburban white Americans and propel former Vice President Richard Nixon to the White House in a political comeback. As part of this rebranding effort, Nixon and the Republicans seized upon the changed social landscape. For Americans, social issues were starting to eclipse other concerns, and the Republicans successfully attributed rioting, crime, and lawlessness to the Democratic administration as they competed for the middle ground. For the Republicans, their timing could not have been better; race and crime were at the forefront of voters' minds as they cast votes in 1968.

The political environment in which the final Kerner Commission report was published can be described as fractious. The country and the in-power Democratic Party were divided, race relations had declined, segregation was as prevalent as ever, and the president clung to his remaining power. The triumph of the early Johnson months had given way to disunity. The commission represented a final look into the ideas of liberalism that the previous four years had helped make a reality. The remarkable progress towards racial equality defined the Johnson era; however, deep fissures remained. The Kerner Commission only extenuated these divides.

The Commission in Context: Segregation

The Kerner Commission was an extensive study into the conditions and quality of life in the inner cities of the United States. It brought the issue of segregation to nationwide attention. Furthermore, it exposed a rot at the heart of American cities. The conditions of extreme poverty exposed in the urban ghettos highlighted many areas that Lyndon Johnson's vast and extensive Great Society programmes had left behind or barely touched. The conditions left behind were the legacy of *de jure* segregation. *De jure* segregation was the legal forced separation of white and black Americans. Fundamentally, years of barely disguised racist laws and housing codes had created an environment that restricted the progress of black Americans. The Kerner Commission exposed these realities as it spoke truth to power. The lasting and continued legacy of *de jure* segregation and the *de facto*

segregation that persisted in the United States meant the environment was unaccommodating for the Kerner Commission's significant proposals for change.

Further factors, such as the rapidly growing black population in the cities, contributed to understanding the Kerner Report and the country's trends, prejudices, and conditions. Due to internal migration that had taken place since the end of World War Two, the black population in the cities had grown exponentially. In 1910, 2.7 million black Americans lived in the cities, roughly 28% of the 9.8 million black population; by 1968, 15 million black Americans lived in cities, which equated to 69% of the 21.5 million black population.[68] One of the trends the Kerner Commission observed was the continuous flow of black migrants from the South, especially from rural areas to the cities of Northern and Western states.[69] Once there, black Americans did not live in integrated neighbourhoods, as white Americans moved out to newer homes in the suburbs; it was typical of a black migrant from the South to move into an older home in the inner city.[70] Therefore, due to a legacy of discriminatory housing policies, many black Americans were restricted to comparatively small and neglected areas in cities.[71] However, some migrants often made this choice to be near family.[72] The environment soon proved that it contained all the circumstances for racial unrest. The conditions are something that the final Kerner Report sought to address. It argued that black American families had been excluded from wealthier white neighbourhoods.[73] The effective exclusion of black Americans from affluent suburbs served as an example of *de facto* segregation, which in itself was a legacy of *de jure* segregation.

De jure segregation was enforced with the Jim Crow era laws that sprung up from the Reconstruction period and reinforced in Southern states up until the Civil Rights Movement. Richard

[68] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 238.
[69] Ibid., 238.
[70] Ibid., 245.
[71] Ibid., 245.
[72] Ibid., 245.
[73] Ibid., 245.

Rothstein, author and academic, argued that *de jure* segregation did not stop with the civil rights progress and persisted, born out of "scores of racially explicit laws, regulations and government practices combined to create a nationwide system of urban ghettos, surrounded by white suburbs."[74] The commissioners found extreme poverty in the urban ghettos; their assessment of these conditions and Rothstein's views on *de jure* segregation demonstrate the extent of a problem that long predated the riots.

The cultural and historical circumstances that *de jure* and *de facto* segregation had created in the late 1960s provided context for the Kerner Commission. The civil rights successes of the Johnson era, notable as they were, were still not significant enough to overcome widespread segregation and inequality. Many problems persisted beyond the reach of the broad laws and regulations of the Great Society. For example, in Proposition 14 in California (although The United States Supreme Court later declared it unconstitutional in 1967), the state voted by a two to one margin to repeal the Rumford Act of 1963, which had outlawed "discrimination by realtors and the owners of apartment houses and homes built with public assistance."[75] In the presidential election of 1964, Johnson had won California by over a million votes, yet the overtly racist Proposition 14 still passed with widespread support. Two years later, in the 1966 Californian gubernatorial election, Democratic Governor Pat Brown had to contend with a proposed open housing law Johnson advocated for at the federal level, contributing to the Republican former actor Ronald Reagan defeating him.[76] Even when laws designed to enforce housing equality existed, they were often navigated. The Commission discovered an example of where enforcement of the housing code in Tampa, FL, did not alleviate a tenant's grievance. The legal sanction against a landlord who violated the housing code consisted of a $25 fine, which was smaller than the cost of making the repairs to

[74] Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America,* (New York: Liveright, 2017), xii.
[75] Raymond E. Wolfinger and Fred I. Greenstein, "The Repeal of Fair Housing in California: An Analysis of Referendum Voting," *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 3 (September 1968): 753. The Repeal of Fair Housing in California: An Analysis of Referendum Voting on JSTOR. Accessed 11th June 2023.
[76] Zeitz, B*uilding the Great Society: Inside Lyndon Johnson's White House*, 254.

the property.[77] Hence, the account provided to the commission's team from the Bureau of Minimum Housing Standards alleged that many landlords paid the fine to avoid more costly repairs and maintenance.[78]

The policies of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) were some of the most overtly racist rules reinforcing the segregated society that existed in the 1960s. The establishment of the FHA's racially restrictive policies predated the civil rights movement and Lyndon Johnson's presidency. It was established as one of Franklin Roosevelt's "alphabet agencies" and guaranteed mortgage loans, thus functioning as a government scheme to encourage more people into home ownership. However, the FHA long endorsed the practice of "redlining", as they designated areas black Americans predominately populated as high risk and not suitable for support; even into the 1950s, the FHA offered "No guarantees for mortgages to African Americans, or to whites who might lease to African Americans, regardless of the applicant's creditworthiness".[79] Combined with the effect of mass internal migration, this resulted in a racially divided society with little benefit to black Americans.

Such explicit evidence of a segregated America led to the commission reaching the "two societies" conclusion.[80] It allowed the commissioners to present evidence of a divided nation to Johnson. It also gave the president a problem: how to sell a push to go further to an increasingly reticent American public. The American people of the late 1960s had become comfortable with white and black Americans living separate, segregated lives.

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[77] Interview of Pete Hevia Director of Bureau of Minimum Housing Standards, Tampa, Florida by Waldo and Birenbaum 4th October 1967 (Tampa Interview Reports IA-8, p. 1-2), "Kerner Commission field team examples for the Interim Report, November 7, 1967," 27th July 1967, Folder: 001346-022-0462, Subject Files of the Special Assistant to the Deputy Executive Director [Series 49], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-022-0462&accountid=7408. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, 67.
[80] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 1.

De facto segregation permeated much of 1960s America. One such concept that reinforced this segregation, overtly or not, was the "white flight" phenomenon. The late 1960s saw the long-term effects of white flight. As white Americans moved out of the cities black Americans moved in, the conditions they moved into got worse over time.[81] In his case study of the racial segregation that divided Atlanta, Kevin Kruse frames the argument of *de jure* or *de facto* segregation as one of national and local politics, where local, private individuals were not using laws but societal norms, practices, and choices to enforce *de facto* segregation.[82] When the commission visited Atlanta, they came to the same conclusions and noted that *de facto* segregation had kept schooling divided among the races.[83] This migration of vast numbers of black Americans into the cities and white Americans out of the cities served as context for the eventual causes of the riots the Kerner Commission would study. Several statistics show the effects of these demographic changes: 70% of black Americans lived in metropolitan areas in 1966, and 64% of whites.[84] From 1950 to 1965, the black population increased by 6.5 million and "over 98% of that increase took place in metropolitan areas."[85] What the commission made clear in its references to segregation was a terrible reality, "Discrimination prevents access to non-slum areas."[86] The Commission argued that black Americans were excluded from these areas for "obvious and overt" and "subtle and hidden" reasons.[87] The politicisation of the riots created further reasoning for those who were never inclined to look into the underlying causes of the violence.

[81] Ibid., 469.
[82] Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.
[83] "Final City Profile, Atlanta, Georgia, Kerner Commission records," Folder: 001346-027-0001, Subject Files of Robert Conot [Series 59], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-027-0001&accountid=7408. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[84] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 243-244.
[85] Ibid., 244.
[86] Ibid., 469.
[87] Ibid., 245.

Furthermore, no one could agree on an explanation for the riots. Many contemporary liberals and social scientists saw the turmoil as an understandable expression of years of repression. In testimony to the commission, William J. Haskins, Associate Director of the National Urban League, offered a powerful oratory as to what the rioters sought to challenge: "They are challenging a system and a society which has failed to respond to their needs."[88] His clarion call represented the essence of the liberal view, "Jobs are needed now. Decent housing is needed now. And equal access to both is needed now. Yes it will cost money. But this is an investment that is in our own self-interest."[89] Conversely, conservatives and a middle-class white majority saw the rioters as lawbreakers who sought to sow chaos in American cities and make unacceptable demands. Of course, Lyndon Johnson flitted and floated between these viewpoints in public and private. The commission's "two societies" summary proved more correct than they realised. The United States was firmly entrenched in two separate societies.[90]

The racism that forged these two societies was an unalterable aspect of American life. Kruse and Rothstein called attention to several symptoms of segregation. However, what was at the core of white flight and racially restrictive housing codes and regulations was racism. In another view, Allen Grimshaw examined racial violence in the United States, and whilst he does not deny that white racism is "salient" in American society, Grimshaw notes sociological and structural perspectives of the violence had to be considered.[91] Grimshaw argued that racist attitudes are learned behaviours from the structure of society and that they started and reinforced unequal

[88] William J. Haskins Testimony before the President's Committee on Civil Disorders, "Hearings of the Kerner Commission, October 5-7, 1967," 7th October 1967, Folder: 001346-014-0475, Data Relating to the Commission Hearings [Series 31], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-014-0475&accountid=7408. Accessed 24th June 2023.
[89] Ibid.
[90] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 1.
[91] Allen D. Grimshaw, "Introduction" in *Racial Violence in the United States",* ed. Allen D. Grimshaw (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 4-5.

practices; as a result, attitudes match these learned behaviours and discrimination in housing and policing is evidence of that.[92]

The report highlighted many of these structural realities. In turn, this placed Johnson in a further predicament. He had to balance the commission's recommendations with political expediency. Many Americans refused even to acknowledge such evidence. The conflicting pressures of the Vietnam War, the demands of liberals, and the outcries from conservatives made this challenge all the more difficult. Structural and inherent racism was another reminder that Johnson was in an unenviable position. Segregation was ingrained in the American psyche; it was not a problem that would yield an easy and fast solution. To solve segregation required deep contrition, a tremendous amount of money, time, and political will to match the commitment a problem of that magnitude needed. Thus, the word of one commission and the time of one election cycle could not solve the effects of deep-rooted segregation.

Johnson's attitude to the commission changed over time. At first, as he created the commission, he saw the bi-partisan group as the best answer to his problems. He grew increasingly aggrieved as it spiralled out of control until he cut funding and forced the commission out. Finally, a reflective president analysed the final report differently and was frustrated that he could not do more. All the while, Lyndon Johnson remained central to the commission's life and legacy. Not a month after he had received the report, in a decision that shocked even his closest allies, he announced he was no longer seeking his party's nomination for president in 1968. The commission had served as another reminder that he could no longer carry on as he once had.

The chapters of this thesis explore Johnson's reaction, the internal deliberations, and the external forces that drove him to think as he did, and how white backlash influenced the commission's destiny. The work looks at the difficulty Johnson faced following the riots and why he chose to disregard the commission. It argues that Johnson's personality framed his actions and that

[92] Ibid., 5.

external factors impacted his frame of mind. This chapter considers the reality that Johnson was no longer the man capable of unifying the country in 1968 and that the Kerner Commission had been right – it was a deeply divided nation. The second chapter explores these divisions in greater detail. It considers the impact of reactionary politics and attitudes on Johnson's decision to ignore his commission. Together, these chapters present the case that Johnson was put in an impossible position that was exasperated due to his own personality and choices.**Chapter 1: Why did Lyndon B. Johnson not Initially Welcome the Kerner Commission? Lyndon B. Johnson**

The president who ordered the commission into existence was also one of the main reasons for its failures. Lyndon Baines Johnson was, in many ways, a remarkable president. His high points ranked alongside the achievements of Abraham Lincoln and his hero, Franklin Roosevelt. On the other hand, historians have rightly considered his failure in Vietnam as a low point of 20th century American history. Melody C. Barnes stated how "Johnson's name is simply synonymous with one of America's darkest foreign policy hours: Vietnam."[93] Johnson's reaction to the Kerner Commission was a poor moment. Much of the reluctance of Johnson's administration to embrace the commission's final report came from the president himself. In his public silence and private denunciations, Johnson condemned the report to become an unheeded historical warning; his personality was paramount as to why he met the final report with initial anger and rejection.

Throughout its lifespan, Johnson's engagement with the commission demonstrated his many personality flaws. After the hasty ordering of its creation and setting loose objectives, he became disillusioned with his commission shortly after its establishment date. He sought to cut funding when it became clear he had lost control of its direction. Johnson's loss of control was far from unique to the commission; it applied to the Vietnam War, his relations with the media, and his ties with

[93] Melody C. Barnes, "Afterword: LBJ's America," in *LBJ'S America: The Life and Legacies of Lyndon Baines Johnson,* eds. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Mark K. Updegrove, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024), 305.

Congress. At the time of the report's publication, in early 1968, Johnson endured the most difficult moments of his presidency. For him, the commission's findings were undoubtedly released at the worst possible time. Weeks before the report's publication, the Tet Offensive had brought Johnson's failings in Vietnam to the forefront of political discussion as the administration's credibility gap was on display.

Two years prior, the 1966 midterms had cut the Democratic Party's congressional majority. Subsequently, the president struggled to pass a tax bill from 1967 until the summer of 1968 to help pay for his domestic agenda and war, as fiscal conservatives in Congress demanded cuts to federal spending. Meanwhile, Johnson's mindset further deteriorated into despair and paranoia. The commission was caught in the middle of this turmoil, which proved to be another sticking point for a president whose time in office was close to ending. Johnson's ego and pettiness contributed to deciding the commission's destiny even before it had started its ground-breaking and vital work.

In his private conversations with J. Edgar Hoover, the powerful Democratic Mayor of Chicago Richard Daley, and Richard Russell, Johnson's myriad of reasons and excuses for why he denounced the commission and promoted conspiracy theories were on display. He advocated conspiracies to Hoover, hit out at Kennedy and liberals to Russell, and ranted about the commission going rogue to Daley. These phone conversations paint a picture of a man concerned that his mistakes outweighed his accomplishments. Moreover, he sought to defend his record to those he knew would listen. Congressional hearings debated not only the cost of the commission but the silence from the executive branch of the government, as liberals were seemingly mystified at Johnson's lack of response. The civil rights president had outwardly turned down an opportunity to push on and take the next steps in the battle for equality. However, the explanation for why Johnson rejected his creation is deep and complicated.

Johnson was a master politician. No shortage of superlatives can describe how effectively he manipulated the levers of power, something he did with such skill to secure the passage of the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, his two standout pieces of civil rights legislation. The Great Society had other successes as well. Medicare and Medicaid provided healthcare to the elderly, disabled, children, and widows.[94] After his landslide election victory in 1964, Lyndon Johnson could have been forgiven for thinking he might have been able to create a legacy akin to Roosevelt. Indeed, as Lewis Gould put it, "Few presidents have a reputation for political adroitness that exceeds that of Lyndon Johnson."[95] Fewer still combined that political skill with the brutal use of power to aid people experiencing poverty, the ill-treated, and the disenfranchised. Johnson himself declared as much in perhaps his most triumphant speech to Congress, where he pushed for the Voting Rights Act. He recalled his humble start as a teacher in a Mexican-American school: "It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country. But now I do have that chance – and I'll let you in on a secret – I mean to use it."[96] However, his only full term as president would unravel into a tragic story. The Lyndon Johnson of 1968 would never be able to stand up before Congress, give a similar oratory to the one in 1965, and recite the famous civil rights line, "We shall overcome."[97]

By 1968, Johnson was behind the times when it came to the advances of liberalism. The civil rights movement and the Democratic Party had changed in ways the president did not comprehend. Johnson was still a disciple of the New Deal; his Great Society had continued from its core ethos and Harry Truman's Fair Deal. He was able to force his chosen legislation through Congress like few other presidents have been capable of doing. Still, he decided to rein in his domestic agenda when few

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[94] Joshua Zeitz, "The War on Poverty," in *LBJ'S America: The Life and Legacies of Lyndon Baines Johnson,* eds.Mark Atwood Lawrence and Mark K. Updegrove, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024), 155.
[95] Lewis L. Gould, "Never a Deep Partisan: Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party, 1963-1969," in *The Johnson Years Volume 3 LBJ at Home and Abroad,* ed. Robert A. Divine, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 21.
[96] Lyndon B. Johnson, *Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise [on the Voting Rights Act], 3/15/65. MP506*, The LBJ Library, 15th March 1965, video file posted 24th June 2013. Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise [on the Voting Rights Act], 3/15/65. MP506. - YouTube. Accessed 11th June 2023.
[97] Ibid.

liberals were willing to accept such restraint, especially at the expense of the Vietnam War. As of 1968, when the Kerner Commission presented him with their findings, Johnson was no longer at the forefront of liberal thought, and his dealings with liberals in his party and his administration led to a disheartened silence. He had increasingly begun to let the negative aspects of his personality show.

Johnson personalised his problems and had a very fragile ego, weaknesses that did not serve him well with regard to the Kerner Commission. His time as vice president in the Kennedy administration, from 20th January 1961 to 22nd November 1963, had left him feeling inadequate; he was mainly excluded when critical decisions were made. Johnson's diminished role as vice president had proved to be quite a step down from the power he previously held. The loss of his influence from his time as Senate Majority Leader (3rd January 1955 to 3rd January 1961) was demonstrated in his relationship with Congress, which was once indisputable. However, "The congressional leaders saw that the Administration's men didn't put much stock in his opinions. So why should they?"[98] After losing his mentor and father figure, Speaker Sam Rayburn, Johnson "possessed now no power at all."[99] Hence, Johnson endured a difficult time as vice president; his troubles stemmed from his loss of power and the fact that he was not a natural fit with the East Coast elites of the Kennedy inner circle.

Furthermore, amongst the Kennedy administration insiders and liberal "New Frontiersmen", he was mocked and belittled due to his Southern heritage.[100] Stories about how he mispronounced "'hors d'oeuvres as whore doves'"[101] were circulated. Crude nicknames were also given to him, such as "'Uncle Cornpone or Rufus Cornpone.'"[102] These experiences profoundly affected the man used to being the centre of attention, the centre of Washington's political world. He took every shun personally, and this trait would follow him into his White House tenure. However, he recognised the

[98] Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson,* vol. 4*, The Passage of Power* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012), 181.
[99] Ibid.*,* 191.
[100] Ibid.*,* 198.
[101] Ibid., 198.
[102] Ibid., 198.

importance of continuity, initially winning over Kennedy administration officials such as Ted Sorensen, Dick Goodwin, and Larry O'Brien, telling them they would be more important to him than they were to Kennedy.[103] The new president acted deferential as he made his requests to Kennedy's aides.[104] Johnson's aide, Jack Valenti, observed that this was no small feat, mentioning the depth of grief that the Kennedy aides felt, "You would have every right to resent this alien cowboy who's now taken over where your god once resided."[105]

Johnson grew more sceptical of Kennedy's aides despite the fact he accomplished much of what Kennedy had wanted to do, including the passage of civil rights legislation. However, he would consider situations that went against him as personal attacks. Other times, he would interpret the same events as a communist or liberal conspiracy targeted at him. For example, Johnson determined that the race riots the Kerner Commission investigated were liberal attacks against him that a shadowy network of civil rights activists and Robert Kennedy had stirred up.

On top of his domestic and political struggles, Johnson was undoubtedly under increased pressure due to the Vietnam War. At its height, the war magnified Johnson's unethical approach to the conflict and challenged the lies he told. As historian Robert David Johnson remarked, "Johnson stretched the constitutional limitations of presidential power on one other set of issues – ethics in government."[106]The commission would face this storm, and it would not escape intact.

Vietnam: A Tragedy of Guns vs. Butter

[103] Marc J. Selverstone, "Power and Purpose: LBJ in the Presidency," in *LBJ'S America: The Life and Legacies of Lyndon Baines Johnson,* eds.Mark Atwood Lawrence and Mark K. Updegrove, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024), 22-23.
[104] Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson,* vol. 4*, The Passage of Power* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012), 409-414.
[105] Jack Valenti, Interview by Sheldon M. Stern, 25th May 1982, Washington, D.C., transcript, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Valenti, Jack J.: Oral History Interview - JFK #1, 5/25/1982 | JFK Library. Accessed 21st January 2024.
[106] Robert David Johnson, "LBJ and the Constitution," in *A Companion to Lyndon Johnson*, ed. Mitchell B. Lerner (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 239.

Vietnam had become Lyndon Johnson's War. Johnson continued a course set out under Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy. He, like his predecessors, sought to contain communism's perceived spread. Still, Johnson escalated the conflict after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. It was under him that hundreds of thousands of ground troops were committed. Furthermore, his orders started Operation Rolling Thunder, which wrought devastation from the air on the North Vietnamese. As a result, Johnson bore the responsibility as Vietnam permeated every aspect of American life and eroded support for him personally and from his cherished Great Society. Furthermore, the rising costs of the war were also economic and political. The costs of fighting on such a scale significantly reduced the resources that could be dedicated to Johnson's Great Society legislation. By 1968, Johnson also needed to introduce a tax to help fund the war effort, a measure he had resisted for some time. Therefore, the depth of the Johnson administration's awful commitment in Vietnam and its effects elsewhere on the president's agenda are critical when considering why Johnson first chose to neglect the Kerner Commission.

Johnson's Model Cities initiative was one such programme which suffered due to his commitment to the war. The legislation underwhelmed many liberals as its costs were spread too thinly. Johnson had persisted in seeking domestic and international triumphs. However, he was unable to achieve such a balance. It is undeniable that at the heart of the tragic failures of Johnson's presidency was the Vietnam War, and the toll it took on Johnson's mind and paranoia would yield the worst consequences for the Kerner Commission, which had the misfortune of publishing its findings as the war had reached its most destructive year in 1968.

The Tet Offensive came at a terrible time for Lyndon Johnson. The North Vietnamese broke a truce and attacked during the Tet holiday, bringing the war and all its brutality from the jungles further North to the streets of Saigon. Although successfully repelled, the attack was a political nightmare for the Johnson administration. Thanks to the television crews based in the South Vietnamese capital, the war was transmitted to the American public, and broader public opinion was

changed.[107] In statements that defied reality, Johnson had long insisted the war was almost won; Tet displayed this was a falsehood.[108] Bernstein said, "Tet made it clear that this would be a long, vicious war, a prospect most Americans could not bear."[109] The war became increasingly unpopular, as did the president with whom it was linked; as the death figures rose, Johnson's approval plummeted.[110] In Gallup polling, Johnson's average approval rating from November 1963 to January 1965 was 74.2%; from January 1965 to January 1969, his average had fallen to 50.3%.[111] His lowest approval rating came in August 1968, at 35%, as the effects of the war had fully become known.[112] However, all presidential approval ratings fall and Johnson's full-term approval average from 1965 to 1969 remains above that of all presidents with more than one term who succeeded him aside from Ronald Reagan (55.3%) and Bill Clinton (60.6%).[113]

Doves, already against the war, hardened their opinion against Johnson. Senator George McGovern (D-SD) and Senator Frank Church (D-ID) were outspoken critics of Johnson's Vietnam policy, "Church's and McGovern's criticisms had typified Johnson's mounting problems with liberals generally."[114] Johnson's alliance with liberals was always an uneasy one, as he remarked to Whitney Young, the Executive Director of the National Urban League, and Roy Wilkins, "'You know the difference between cannibals and liberals?' he asked 'Cannibals only eat their enemies.'"[115] Increasingly, he was backed into a perilous position both on the battlefields of Southeast Asia and the corridors of power in Washington.

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[107] Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* 475-6.
[108] Ibid., 475-6.
[109] Ibid., 476.
[110] Gould, "Never a Deep Partisan: Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party, 1963-1969", 35.
[111] "Presidential Approval Ratings – Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends," Accessed May 25, 2023, Presidential Approval Ratings | Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War,* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 119, - VleReader. Accessed 7th June 2023.
[115] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years,* 260

Tet was far from the only moment of reckoning for Johnson in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson's presidency was undone from 27th February to 1st March 1968, and the presence of the Kerner Report was conspicuous on these days as well. On 27th February, the Commission's Executive Director David Ginsburg met with key Johnson aide, White House Domestic Affairs Advisor Joseph Califano, Jr., to hand him a copy of the report ahead of time. Califano recalled that Ginsburg expected resistance from Johnson as he told him, "It was the best they could do for LBJ."[116] Indeed, the final report did reflect the commissioners' agreed findings in what Ginsburg said three decades later was "the full story."[117] In many aspects, the commission was favourable to the president, and it gave him ammunition to pursue fair housing policies should he have chosen to do so. However, Johnson would remain unconvinced. Later that day, Califano, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the incoming Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, and National Security Advisor Walter Rostow attended a meeting to discuss General William Westmoreland's request for 205,179 more troops, which the day after Johnson punted; he asked Clifford to review the war and the proposal.[118] If Johnson believed that Clifford would have found a solution to his war problems, he was mistaken, as his new Secretary of Defense admitted in an oral history interview, "In a matter of weeks, I began to change my views."[119] Just as fatal for Johnson, the nation's most trusted news anchor, Walter Cronkite, spoke out against the war on the same day.[120]

On 29th February, Johnson met with Califano in the morning to discuss the Kerner Report.[121] In this meeting, Johnson angrily slammed the report and refused to accept it.[122] Ginsburg attempted

[116] Ibid., 261.
[117] David Ginsburg, interview by Jeffrey F. Liss, 15th July 1998, interview 3 transcript, Oral History Project, The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit, Complete Oral History Package of David Ginsburg (dcchs.org). Accessed 26th July 2023.
[118] Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* 478-479.
[119]Clark M. Clifford, interview by Joe B. Frantz, 7th August 1969, Washington, D.C., interview 4 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Oral history transcript, Clark M. Clifford, interview 4 (IV), 8/7/1969, by Joe B. Frantz · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 29th June 2023.
[120] Max Hastings, Vietnam: An Epic History of a Tragic War, (London: William Collins, 2018), 247-248.
[121] Presidential Daily Diary, 29th February 1968, Daily Diary of President Johnson (1963-1969), The Presidential Documents Series, Reel 11 (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 2.
[122] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson,* 261.

to call Johnson later that day, only to be rebuffed by the president, who directed him to Califano, using the cover of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's farewell ceremony at the Pentagon.[123] In these few days, Johnson's presidency had suffered decisive blows to the conflicts in Vietnam and the American cities he was bogged down in. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between Johnson's failures in Vietnam and on the Kerner Commission, where his indecisiveness and pettiness were on full display. Moreover, his interactions with his closest aides showed that the conflict and its domestic ramifications had increasingly caused Johnson to feel trapped.

The precarious balance Johnson tried to navigate was best understood in a speech given in October 1967 by Johnson's Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Eugene Rostow (brother of Walter). In this speech, Rostow underlined the reasons for American involvement in Vietnam and how he saw it as intrinsically linked to the domestic issues faced by the United States.[124] Rostow argued that success in the Vietnam War determined the domestic destiny of the United States, "We cannot expect to be allowed to pursue our domestic goals, vital as they are, in a world that is not reasonably safe for our democracy."[125] Rostow's speech occurred after the summer riots of 1967; despite this, he remained an unabashed foreign policy hawk. Here was a member of Johnson's administration who had openly announced that Vietnam would have to come first, regardless of the cities' situation. For many hawks and Johnson, the Vietnam War took precedence. Rostow's tone reflected that hawks had taken over the Johnson administration, particularly those who connected foreign triumphs to domestic achievements, with Rostow saying, "My belief is that America's international role and her domestic excellence not only are compatible but mutually dependent."[126] Rostow's reasons mirrored the argument Johnson made in his State of the Union Address in January

[123] Presidential Daily Diary, 29th February 1968, Reel 11, 3.
[124] Eugene V. Rostow, Another Round in the Great Debate: American Security an Unstable World: An Address by Eugene V. Rostow Under Security for Political Affairs, 17th October 1967. American Security an Unstable World: An Address by Eugene V. Rostow Under Security for Political Affairs, Pamphlet, Lawrence, Kansas: Department of State, 1967, 2.
[125] Ibid., 2.
[126] Ibid., 11.

1966 when he declared, “This Nation is mighty enough, its society is healthy enough, its people are strong enough, to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society here at home.”[127]

However, Rostow further undermined Johnson’s domestic agenda; remarkably, he added: “It’s no good building model cities if they are to be bombed in 20 years’ time.”[128] Rostow’s assertion was an astonishing statement for a member of Johnson’s own State Department to have made. It showed how the attention of many hawks in the Johnson administration, and indeed Congress, had turned away from domestic matters. Furthermore, the doves and those whose attitudes evolved like Clifford and McNamara before him had realised that the war was unwinnable. McNamara no longer believed in a military solution from around January 1966.[129] However, hawks such as the military Joint Chiefs of Staff, Dean Rusk, and the Rostow brothers still drove the president's decisions in late 1967 and early 1968.[130]

Johnson’s personality flaws were most evident from his day-to-day dealings with the matters of the war. His failings were well documented in the Johnson tapes and the accounts of advisors such as McNamara. From these, it is clear how Johnson’s grip on power loosened, showing how his reaction to the Kerner Commission is best understood through the lens of the broader discourse on Vietnam. Johnson’s decision to hide the costs of the conflict displayed his deceit. He tasked McNamara with this responsibility to avoid further congressional scrutiny.[131] The president remained committed to his quest for an answer to all of America’s problems as he pursued his quest for success on both fronts. He attempted to conceal the actual price of the war while pushing for more and more spending on the Great Society.

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[127] Lyndon B. Johnson, “State of the Union Address,” transcript of speech delivered at Washington, D.C. 12th January 1966, January 12, 1966: State of the Union | Miller Center. Accessed on 12th June 2023.
[128] Rostow, Another Round in the Great Debate, 18.
[129] Hastings, Vietnam: An Epic History of a Tragic War, 417-418.
[130] Aurélie, Basha I Novosejt, *“I Made Mistakes”: Robert McNamara’s Vietnam War Policy, 1960-1968,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 136 & 188.
[131] Ibid., 153.

By 1968, with no end to the war in sight, these problems had become fatal for Johnson; in the words of Paul Conkin, he had "either deceitfully or foolishly, tried the impossible – in his own terms, to buy both guns and butter."[132] Pursuing domestic and foreign policy success was futile as the war destroyed the president's credibility. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who served as Special Assistant to the President in the Kennedy administration, was a renowned historian and a critic of Johnson's Vietnam War policy. Although Schlesinger was far from the most senior member of Kennedy's White House, Caro noted he had an importance to the American left, that he was to them, "the very embodiment of liberalism."[133] Writing in 1966, he was aware of the impact of Vietnam on the home agenda of Congress and the executive branch, "With Vietnam gulping down a billion and a half dollars a month, everything is grinding to a stop."[134] Despite the enduring successes of the early Great Society era, by 1968, the war had limited the chances Johnson had to add to his vast domestic agenda.

Additionally, the war illustrated a growing credibility gap between the president and the populace. Johnson maintained that victory was imminent, but with each passing day, such assertions grew less and less believable to the American people. Thus, Schlesinger determined, "The sad truth is our government just doesn't know a lot of things it pretends to know."[135] The lack of understanding of Vietnam was the reality that undermined Johnson's presidency and his liberal agenda; he had a problem when determining what was true and false, as Schlesinger observed from Johnson's addresses, "One cannot remember a more complete disassociation between words and responsibility than in the United States government today."[136] Soldiers who went to Vietnam wore

[132] Paul K. Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson,* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 206.
[133] Caro, *The Passage of Power,* 409.
[134] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1966,* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1966), 63.
[135] Ibid., 74-75.
[136] Ibid., 87.

badges "'ambushed at Credibility Gap' – that called their commander in chief a liar."[137] Fatally, Johnson's course eroded the standing of the United States and his government.

The credibility gap upset Johnson, who craved public approval. As they discussed Johnson, President Dwight Eisenhower and the soon-to-be-elected Nixon considered the incumbent president's predicament in July 1967. According to Nixon's recollection in his memoirs, Eisenhower observed, "Lyndon is too-poll conscious and too sensitive about press criticism."[138] Eisenhower believed the root of the problem was Johnson's tendency to do what would gain the validation for the policies he sought, "The difficulty with Johnson is that he is only interested in what people will approve, and that makes it difficult to get people to believe him."[139] Eisenhower's assessment of Johnson was astute. As Johnson's presidency developed, it became more difficult for him to gain the approval he desired from the press, his fellow politicians, and the American public.

In addition to undermining the global credibility of the United States, Vietnam had a devastating effect on the country's finances. The economics of the war significantly undermined Johnson's domestic agenda. Thus, as the war escalated throughout Johnson's presidency, its costs spiralled out of control. Johnson's efforts were similarly re-routed away from his pride and joy domestic agenda to the financing of the war. The hole left in the nation's finances was substantial; Vietnam had created a large budget deficit, which decreased the dollar's strength. Diane Kunz noted, "The Vietnam-induced budget deficit and the balance of payments deficit were related: the former weakened foreign confidence in the dollar, thereby exacerbating the latter, to which the Vietnam War had already significantly contributed."[140] In addition, banks lost belief in the value of the dollar.[141] A comparison of the budget deficit as a percentage of the United States Gross Domestic

[137]Caro, *The Means of Ascent,* XXV.
[138] Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon,* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978), 286.
[139] Ibid.*,* 286-287.
[140] Diane B. Kunz, "The American Economic Consequences of 1968," in *1968: The World Transformed*, eds. Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert and Detlef Junker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99.
[141] Leonard Dudley and Peter Passell, "The War in Vietnam and the United States Balance of Payments," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 50, no. 4 (November 1968): 437. https://doi.org/10.2307/1926809. Accessed 4th February 2024.

Product (GDP) explained the scale of the problem. In 1965, the United States had an average budget deficit of $1.14 billion dollars, which was -0.19% of their GDP; in 1968, the average budget deficit had grown to $4.03 billion dollars, which was -2.67% of the United States GDP.[142] Consequently, Johnson was determined to pass a tax increase to help counter the effects of inflation.[143] However, the tax increase had to come to the detriment of Johnson's social agenda; Kunz suggests that this was why Johnson refused to endorse the commission's recommendations.[144]

Lyndon Johnson was far from a frugal spender, especially when the economy grew. Johnson promoted Keynesian economic policies, which contributed to the issue of inflation. Low interest rates and the expense of fighting in Vietnam forced Johnson to look for solutions to combat inflation.[145] With regard to the pressures to cut costs from his social programmes, Johnson was reluctant to reveal the actual costs of fighting in Vietnam to the American public, knowing that such an action doomed his Great Society.[146] Thus, he had to cut back on any future grand domestic plans. The Kerner Commission, a natural continuation of the Great Society, which even Johnson acknowledged closely followed his agenda, suffered as a result.[147]

The commission gave those who disagreed with Johnson over the war but supported a liberal domestic agenda something to argue for. In addition, it gave those who wanted such a platform the chance to conclude that the Johnson administration was trading domestic success for a continuation of the war. Liberals in Congress saw the commission's recommendations as an alternative to the violence in Vietnam and American cities. Senator Ernest Gruening (D-AK) was one such member of Congress who supported the commission's conclusions, and he described the report

[142] "Federal Surplus or Deficit [-] as Percent of Gross Domestic Product," Accessed 4th February 2024. Federal Surplus or Deficit [-] as Percent of Gross Domestic Product (FYFSGDA188S) | FRED | St. Louis Fed (stlouisfed.org) and "Federal government budget surplus or deficit (-)," Accessed 4th February 2024. Federal government budget surplus or deficit (-) (M318501Q027NBEA) | FRED | St. Louis Fed (stlouisfed.org).
[143] Ibid., 99.
[144] Ibid., 99-100.
[145] Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson,* 204
[146] Ibid.
[147] Johnson, *Vantage Point,* 172.

as having painted "a most serious and disturbing picture."[148] Meanwhile, he was an ardent critic of the conflict in Vietnam; in the same speech where he praised the commission and called for the enactment of its recommendations, he drew attention to the impossibility of doing so whilst the United States was engaged in what he called "a senseless war in Vietnam – an illegal, undeclared war – which is costing the United States at least $3 billion per month."[149] Liberals believed Johnson was trading domestic success for the continued push for victory in Vietnam. One such trade-off Johnson was willing to make was the Kerner Commission. It was hung out to dry when it was published. In the Senate, Gruening pled his hopes for the commission. "It is my fervent hope that their recommendations will be heeded and that history will not record that theirs were voices crying into the wilderness."[150]

Gruening was among only two senators to vote against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964. He had long advocated for a different foreign policy instead of interventions that supported dictators. Instead, he proposed "that the United States needed to stand on principle in international affairs, and that the moral power resulting from sustained application of that principle would do more for the long-term security of the country than economic or military programs."[151] In 1968, his arguments were the same as those used by many liberals who came out against the war, "It makes no sense whatsoever to me to be fighting a war 10,000 miles away to impose so called democracy upon a people who have never known democracy and whose corrupt rulers do not want it, while, at the same time, because of lack of resources, we are not taking the necessary steps to save democracy at home."[152]

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[148] Ernest Gruening, "U.S. Congressional Record Senate," 1st March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4861.
[149] Ibid., 4861.
[150] Ibid., 4861.
[151] Robert David Johnson, "Ernest Gruening and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution: Continuities in American Dissent," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, No. 2 (Summer 1993): 128. *Ernest Gruening and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution: Continuities in American Dissent (jstor.org). Accessed 12th June 2023.
[152] Gruening, U.S. Congressional Record, 1st March 1968, 4861.

In his assessment of Johnson's handling of the war, Schlesinger was even less reserved than Gruening, "The President of the United States can hardly understand the eastern seaboard of his own country; why in the world does he think he can understand the eastern seaboard of Asia?"[153] Like Gruening and many other political figures against the war, Schlesinger concluded that the United States' commitment to Vietnam was based upon "a foundation so vague and precarious."[154] For the politicians who leaned left, the war functioned as an essential parallel, with similarities and dichotomies drawn between the situation in American cities and the Southeast Asian jungles and used to chastise the president.

Vietnam left Johnson distressed and overwhelmed as he doggedly sought a solution. The ongoing conflict affected his psyche, which in turn affected his rationality. He was mentally and physically exhausted at the time of the commission's publication, worn down by the war. Paranoia, which had long been a side of Johnson, seeped in, that the fighting only served to catalyse. Bernstein retold Johnson's night-time behaviour, "Unable to sleep, he would wander in during the night in his bathrobe to read the messages, to examine the aerial photographs, and to get the latest casualty figures."[155]

Despite these personal struggles, Johnson remained steadfast in his pursuit of victory in Vietnam; he continued to push for a military solution to the conflict. His stubborn pursuit of success gradually put him at odds with his own civilian Department of Defense officials. He expressed great disdain for the civilian officials at the Pentagon to his mentor, Richard Russell. Johnson believed they were behind leaks and furiously told Russell that their actions were "almost treasonable Dick."[156] He went further still and criticised the staff in the Pentagon: "They practically all want to surrender."[157]

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[153] Schlesinger, Jr. *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1966*, 87.
[154] Ibid., 75.
[155] Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* 476.
[156] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Russell on 22 March, 1968," Telephone conversation # 12830, sound recording, LBJ and RICHARD RUSSELL, 22/3/1968, 4:49PM, Recordings and Transcripts of Telephone Conversations and Meetings, (LBJ Presidential Library), URL:https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/tel-12830. Accessed on 12th June 2023.
[157] Ibid.

Not satisfied, he continued his astonishing attack. He targeted Paul Nitze, The Deputy Security of Defense, who defied the president's will on testifying on a military systems bill, an act Johnson labelled as "insubordinate."[158]

Even more damaging to Johnson was the breakdown over Vietnam between him and a man he came to rely on most during the war, Robert McNamara. McNamara's views on Vietnam developed over time, eventually becoming the opposite of his boss'. By 1967, McNamara was surprised that he still held the Secretary of Defense position.[159] In his memoirs, he recalled that the solution Johnson sought was not to be found: "Bombing would not allow us to win on the cheap."[160] McNamara's 18th May 1966 speech in Montreal caused further "considerable pain"[161] for Johnson as the active Secretary of Defense called for a different approach to ensure the security of the United States. In his remarks, McNamara opined: "A nation can reach the point at which it does not buy more security for itself simply by buying more military hardware, and we are at that point."[162] McNamara's disloyalty, whether he intended to cause disrespect or not, "informed and encouraged Robert F. Kennedy's ascent as the flagbearer of the backlash against President Johnson."[163]

Furthermore, the speech echoed the warnings of Eisenhower, who had counselled in his farewell address that the United States "must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex."[164] The Vietnam War and his unyielding pursuit of a victory confirmed that the 36th president did not heed the warning of the 34th. Johnson's administration had been unable to move away from the militarisation that had in

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[158] Ibid.
[159] Basha I Novosejt, *"I Made Mistakes": Robert McNamara's Vietnam War Policy, 1960-1968,* 199.
[160] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, 286.
[161] Ibid., 311.
[162] Ibid., 311.
[163] Aurélie, Basha I Novosejt, "Breaking Ranks: Robert McNamara, Adam Yarmolinsky, and the Montreal Speech," *Diplomatic History* 43, no. 3 (2019): 495, Breaking Ranks: Robert McNamara, Adam Yarmolinsky, and the Montreal Speech* | Diplomatic History | Oxford Academic (oup.com). Accessed on 12th June 2023.
[164] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Farewell Address," transcript of a speech delivered at Washington, D.C. 17th January 1961, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-17-1961-farewell-address. Accessed on 12th June 2023.

part been due to their commitments in Vietnam. In his research on Eisenhower's prophetic warning, author James Ledbetter observed how the military-industrial complex had infected the United States and had a hand "in distorting national social and political priorities."[165] In the same vein of McNamara's Montreal speech, Ledbetter observed how the military-industrial complex had influenced Congress into "distorting use of the military budget to build weapons for political purposes, regardless of whether they actually increase national security."[166] Opponents of the Vietnam War, such as Senator William Proxmire (D-WI), observed how military spending had gotten out of hand, and thus his economic frugality and war opposition combined.[167] What was clear is that the influence of the military-industrial complex had created a situation where an immensely bloated military budget had significantly impacted the Johnson administration's ability to spend on social programmes. After all, many congressional leaders paid attention to the defence industry because it was a vote winner and in many constituencies with military bases, they were significant job providers. Urban ghettos were not vote winners; it was easy for politicians to forget them.

Johnson's difficult economic position was made clear in a press conference on 18th August 1967. In this press briefing, the president was questioned about the domestic legislation that remained stuck on Capitol Hill.[168] Johnson noted that he had to make several cuts to different parts of his agenda; Model Cities, an urban renewal plan, and social security, among others, were highlighted.[169] Despite his stalled domestic legislation, Johnson remained unmoved when he reiterated the United States' objective in Vietnam, "Our policy in Vietnam is the same: We are there

[165] James Ledbetter, *Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex,*(New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2011), 134, Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex on JSTOR. Accessed on 12th June 2023.
[166] Ibid., 142.
[167] Ibid., 168-170.
[168] Lyndon B. Johnson, "August 18, 1967: Press Conference," August 18, 1967: Press Conference | Miller Center. Accessed on 15th September 2023.
[169] Ibid.

to deter aggression."[170] Johnson was willing to compromise his domestic agenda to seek victory in Vietnam.

In addition to concerns over the excessive military spending, McNamara found Johnson was unwilling to resort to a negotiated peace, "President Johnson was not ready to accept that."[171] Whether he was willing to or not, the president had to face reality where the war had created conditions, which meant the Kerner Report was released to a more hostile environment than it would have done had it been produced in the early heydays of the Great Society. Johnson's reluctance to seek peace and his continued pursuit of unobtainable victory only contributed to him being in an impossible position by the beginning of 1968. Indeed, Schlesinger believed in 1966 that "the Great Society is now, except for token gestures, dead."[172]

Johnson's Personality

One of Johnson's most significant weaknesses was how he personalised problems. He could be petty. Almost from its inception, his reaction to the Kerner Commission demonstrated this flaw. In a call with Chicago Mayor Richard Daley on 13th March 1968, Johnson discussed the dilemma he found himself in. The day before, in an embarrassing upset for an incumbent, the president had only just beaten Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary. In this call, he turned his ire onto the report, commissioners, and familiar foes. The one commissioner who received most of the blame was John Lindsay. He accused Lindsay of moving the commission to the left.

Johnson complained: "Well, I didn't realise that when I appointed Kerner that this son of a bitch from New York, Lindsay, would take charge."[173] In one sense, Johnson was correct; Lindsay and

[170] Ibid.
[171] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam,* 313.
[172] Schlesinger, Jr. *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1966*, 63.
[173] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard J. Daley on 13 March 1968," Conversation WH6803- 02-12812-12813, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition,* [Johnson Telephone Tapes: 1968, ed. Kent B. Germany, Nicole Hemmer, and Ken Hughes] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4005962. Accessed on 12th June 2023.

his disciples did take control of the committee.[174] Katherine Peden, one of Johnson's closest allies on the commission, observed how Lindsay hijacked proceedings: "At times John would sort of overwhelm the Governor and the commission members with the number of staff people he'd bring down."[175] Therefore, Johnson's claims were based on truth, and how he may have felt he had been taken advantage of was understandable. Califano feared this would happen and believed the report would turn into Johnson's "Frankenstein's monster."[176] Johnson had inadvertently stacked his commission with strong personalities who were relatively liberal. In addition, Kerner proved to be "a loyal but weak chairman."[177] As an act of revenge against the commissioners, whom he believed had treated him so poorly, Johnson refused to sign copies of standard thank you letters.[178] Moreover, the call to Daley and his views on Lindsay further highlight Johnson's tendency to personalise matters. Furthermore, Lindsay's appropriation of the commission's direction evidenced how the New York Mayor blindsided the president.

A frustrated Johnson felt isolated and under attack from both the right and the left. The feelings of frustration resulted in the call where he raged at Daley, "Every time you appoint one of these committees you get more than you can do anything about."[179] Johnson remarked, "But, now, the trouble with a commission – you appoint one and, my gosh, they're liable to recommend to you something that you'll have to turn over and knockdown."[180] He worried that the commission would do more harm to him than good, "It'll hurt you worse unless you're careful."[181] In essence, the commission already had fundamentally harmed his re-election chances due to the splits caused between him, the rest of the party, and white society. Even two weeks after receiving the report,

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[174] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism,* 241.
[175] Katherine Graham Peden, interview by Joe B. Frantz, 13th November 1970. Louisville, KY. transcript. Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part I: The White House and Executive Departments. National Archives and Records Administration. https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=002276-014-0512&accountid=7408. Accessed 11th June 2023.
[176] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*, 217.
[177] Ibid., 260.
[178] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, xiii.
[179] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard J. Daley on 13 March 1968."
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.

Johnson believed the document had hurt him politically. Critically, he focussed on Robert Kennedy's criticism of him in the Senate, saying, "Bobby gave me hell today for not carrying out the Kerner Commission study."[182] Indeed, one such political consequence of the Kerner Commission was that Johnson felt it had played into the hands of a man who would soon rival him for the presidency.

In addition, Johnson took the Kerner Report as a personal insult. He believed the findings did not give him or his Great Society programmes the credit it (and he) deserved; hence, he never received the report in a public ceremony.[183] Califano believed Johnson refused to speak about the Commission's findings "because he was hurt."[184] Whitney Young also agreed that Johnson "took it personally."[185] It remained apparent to those closest to him that Johnson should have, at the very least, acknowledged the excellent work the report had done.[186] Ben Wattenberg, who served as a speech writer in the Johnson White House and worked onthe commission's announcement, postulated that "Johnson did not react wisely to the Kerner Commission report."[187] Johnson's reluctance over the commission created the disconnect between him and his domestic aides, which Califano substantiated when he recalled how he and Johnson argued about the report on the 29th February 1968 "for the better part of an hour."[188]

Despite this, Johnson would not change his mind. The commission's members anticipated the president's stubbornness would be an issue. Therefore, they attempted to appease him. Harris noted: "We even had a fellow, Henry "Boots" Taliaferro, Jr., make up a list of favourable references to the Johnson Administration in the Kerner Commission report to send over to him and, I think, just

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[182] Ibid.
[183] Zelizer, "Introduction to the 2016 Edition," in The Kerner Report, *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,* xxxii – xxxiii.
[184] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*, 260.
[185] Whitney Young, interview by T.H. Baker, 18th June 1969, interview 1 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Oral history transcript, Whitney M. Young, Jr., interview 1 (I), 6/18/1969, by T.H. Baker · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 15th September 2023.
[186] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, 255.
[187] Ben Wattenberg, interview by T. H. Baker, 23rd November 1968, transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Oral history transcript, Ben Wattenberg, interview 1 (I), 11/23/1968, by T.H. Baker · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org), Accessed on 12th June 2023.
[188] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*, 261.

the page numbers and references alone came to seven or eight pages. But, by that time, it was too late – if there was ever a chance – to get him to say something favourable about it."[189] Taliaferro's memo wanted to draw attention to "(1) some of the countless specific references in the report to policies and programs proposed and advocated by President Johnson and enacted and implemented during his administration, and (2) some of the many general references to leadership and progress during this administration."[190] The memo lists the report's references to the administration's achievements in employment, education, welfare, housing, and law enforcement.[191] The memo provided several points of agreement and recommendations for expanding the Johnson agenda.[192] Commission passages that praise the Model Cities legislation, the Higher Education Act of 1965, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and increased federal spending on housing were all emphasised by Taliaferro's work.[193] Johnson's role in the passage of the Civil Rights Act is also mentioned.[194] Taliaferro did not have to work hard to highlight the progress made under Johnson, as Wattenberg admitted, "The Kerner Commission Report does mention it ultimately - - that there has been tremendous progress."[195] Whitney Young also observed much of what Johnson had wanted was in the text of the Kerner Report.[196]

However, despite the facts, the president could not have been appeased. After all, Johnson's handpicked Executive Director, David Ginsburg, is suspected of leaking the report (he had become so convinced and moved by the importance of the commission's work), so Johnson could not have an

[189] Harris, RFKOH-FRH-01 Fred R. Harris Oral History Interview – RFK#1
[190] Henry B. Taliaferro Jr. to David Ginsburg, Memorandum, "Henry B. Talliaferro Jr. correspondence on Kerner Commission final report and field research reports, November 1, 1967-March 11, 1968," 11th March 1968, Folder: 001346-018-0831, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-018-0831&accountid=7408. Accessed on 18th June 2023.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Wattenberg, interview, 23rd November 1968, transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories.
[196] Young, 18th June 1969, interview 1 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

excuse for suppressing it.[197] In his own words, thirty years after the report, Ginsburg recalled that his time on the commission "was a personal revelation that still moves and besets me."[198] Ginsburg also spoke of his dedication to his work, where he barely left his office and realised the extent of the problem of poverty for black Americans, "It was an emotional revolution."[199] However, in the eyes of the president, the commission had already revolted against its creator, and the commissioners had committed a cardinal sin for a man who valued loyalty as highly as Lyndon Johnson did. Even the commissioners' best efforts to control the president's reaction to prevent him from quashing the report ultimately failed.

In giving in to political expediency, Johnson had gone against the will of his advisors. Ginsburg was chosen for his role due to his loyalty to the president. However, in an interaction with Johnson, Ginsburg remembered how the president had cautioned against giving him political advice and instead told him to tell him what was right, "When you're in this office, tell me what's right; I'll tell you what's politic."[200] In providing Johnson with the disconcerting Kerner Report, Ginsburg had told Johnson what was right, but the president had given in to politics and decided what was required could not be done. Ginsburg would say in his oral history interview, "Whether that "right" answer could be accomplished or achieved or whether or how compromise was necessary was his responsibility; these other matters he knew best and would decide."[201] Johnson had made his mind up; the commission was not worth the struggle.

Johnson's aides were aghast at his response to the commission. In the administration, he dealt with the commission alone and cast it aside. His cabinet members were given copies of the report, but their lack of action and response shows that Johnson quickly quashed the discussion of

[197] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, 254.
[198] David Ginsburg, interview by Jeffrey F. Liss, 7th October 1998, interview 4 transcript, Oral History Project, The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit, Complete Oral History Package of David Ginsburg (dcchs.org). Accessed on 26th July 2023.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid.

the research. As the reaction of Califano shows, the president was on his own in the view of his closest aides. Historian Gareth Davies noted, "Johnson's response to those findings and the unanimity with which advisers had regretted that response all attest to his profound isolation."[202] His key domestic aides, such as Califano, did not share his initial reluctance, proving Johnson was at odds with his West Wing officials over the administration's direction on the report.

Johnson's staff and aides tried to manage his personality. Johnson was a tough man to work for. For example, he insisted on having a phone installed in Califano's office bathroom and requested that when he went to worship, he sit at the back of the church so that if he ever needed to reach him, he could do so.[203] Some aides offered words of understanding, such as Wattenberg, who felt Johnson's reaction to the commission was somewhat justifiable, "After having had that kind of progress in the last three years or four years of his Presidency as of that time, and not mentioning it seems absurd to me on their part."[204] However, even Wattenberg conceded that the president "was very foolish, I think, in letting that pique show publicly."[205] Johnson's inner circle felt the full force of his personality and his retorts against the commission, and they knew he should have handled things differently.

Another feature of Johnson's personality that applied to the commission was his tendency to believe in conspiracies as the origin of the riots. Combined with his tendency to personalise problems, his conspiracy theories fuelled his opinion that the riots were a targeted attack on him. Johnson believed he had done so much for black Americans that they could not possibly be rioting without outside influence; in his mind, it was all that made sense after his litany of legislative successes on civil rights. Such a tendency began with the Watts riots in the summer of 1965, and it was a turning point for Johnson, who, in March of that year, openly praised black Americans whose

[202] Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas, 1996), 207.
[203] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*, 12-13.
[204] Wattenberg, interview, 23rd November 1968, transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories.
[205] Ibid.

"demonstrations have been designed to call attention to injustice, designed to provoke change, designed to stir reform."[206] Understandably, the situations were different, but the change of sentiment was stark. Race riots and unrest amongst black Americans predated Johnson's time in the Oval Office, which demonstrated the legacies of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation ran far deeper than the time of his presidency.

Thus, for Lyndon Johnson, the 1967 summer riots had to be a liberal extremist or communist plot targeted at him.[207] Whitney Young remarked that the rise in black militancy had left Johnson feeling personally attacked.[208] Johnson even assigned Walter Rostow to collect evidence about the riots.[209] Rostow's involvement demonstrates Johnson's belief in external (communist) influences, as he placed his National Security Advisor on the case. Furthermore, in a call two days before establishing the commission, Johnson set FBI Director Hoover the following task: "I want you to keep your men busy to find a central connection."[210] He continued, "So you better watch Newark and watch Detroit and watch Plainfield and see, and we'll find some central theme down the road a little bit."[211] Johnson demonstrably had private doubts about the causes of the riots and seemed focused on a conspiracy as a reason.

The wording in this call with Hoover varied greatly from his executive order and the remarks he gave as he established the commission. In this announcement, Johnson set a considerate tone

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[206] Johnson, *Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise [on the Voting Rights Act], 3/15/65. MP506.*
[207] Steven, F. Lawson, "Mixing Moderation with Militancy: Lyndon Johnson and African-American Leadership," in *The Johnson Years Volume 3 LBJ at Home and Abroad,* ed. Robert A. Divine, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994). 106.
[208] Young, 18th June 1969, interview 1 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.
[209] Kent B. Germany, "African-American Civil Rights," in *A Companion to Lyndon Johnson*, ed. Mitchell B. Lerner (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 123.
[210] "Lyndon B. Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover on 25 July 1967," Conversation WH6707-01-12005, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition,* [Lyndon B. Johnson and Civil Rights, vol. 2, ed. Kent B. Germany] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4005335. Accessed on 12th June 2023.
[211] Ibid.

and urged the commission to "let your search be free. Let it be untrammelled."[212] By contrast, in private, according to Califano, Johnson used to "mutter about communist support of black radicals."[213] In the call with Hoover, he again alluded to this same theme with the phrase: "Some of my old friends and your old friends that are after the both of us."[214] When Johnson's other statements are considered, it can be inferred that he is talking about Robert Kennedy or Martin Luther King, as Hoover also despised Kennedy and King. Hence, the call with Hoover showed that Johnson saw the riots as a means of getting at him from certain political factions, "I wouldn't be a damn bit surprised if this poverty group here is not stirring up some of this."[215] The president struggled to shake his belief that liberals and radicals worked to undermine him.

Johnson also told Ginsburg that some outside conspiracy had been behind the riots. Whilst discussing the riots with Ginsburg, who recalled the president slamming the desk and saying, "'You can't tell me that somebody didn't press a button and have all these cities and all these communities erupt.'"[216] According to Ginsburg, Johnson was also suspicious of the riots' timing and feared a communist plot.[217] This proved that not just Hoover was burdened with Johnson's point of view.

Johnson's ire and suspicions of the more liberal elements of society and government further reinforced his initial thoughts about the commission. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been a sceptic of the commission when it was established. However, upon its publication, King endorsed the report as it called for many of the recommendations from the Poor People's March he was organising when the commission finalised its work.[218] King's praise for the Kerner Report demonstrated an even wider

[212] Johnson, Statement By the President, "Executive Order 11365, establishment of Kerner Commission, July 29, 1967," Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.
[213] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*, 217.
[214] "Lyndon B. Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover on 25 July 1967."
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ginsburg, interview 3 transcript, Oral History Project, The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Charles Kaiser, *1968 In America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* (New York, Grove Press: 1988), 141.

rift between him and the president, a division that had already accelerated with King's outspoken opposition to Vietnam. King's criticism solidified after his speech in New York on 4th April 1967, where he stated, "My conscience leaves me no choice."[219]

The call with Hoover and Ginsburg's oral history recollections revealed how Johnson viewed the riots. The conversations showed that the president remained convinced of a conspiracy behind the unrest in the days before the commission was established. However, in his testimony to the commission, Hoover stated, "The FBI has received no evidence at this time to substantiate the allegations that these disturbances are part of an overall conspiracy."[220] When Lindsay asked him to clarify that no general conspiracy existed, Hoover replied, "Correct."[221] Consequently, the published report conclusively determined, "The urban disorders of the summer of 1967 were not caused by, nor were they the consequence of, any organized plan or 'conspiracy.'"[222] In private, Johnson never supported Hoover's or the commissioners' conclusions but did not publicly raise the prospect of a conspiracy. Hence, it was doubtful that a final report that challenged his ingrained opinions would ever have changed the president's mind. Johnson's scepticism showed that the commission already had an insurmountable hurdle to overcome, as his call with Hoover, his disillusionment with King, and his beliefs expressed to Ginsburg demonstrated days before it was even established.

Congressional testimony and the final report also disproved Johnson's conceptions of a mass conspiracy. However, Kerner explained the misapprehension Johnson privately held in statements to the Senate on 13th March 1968. His comments partly justified Johnson's reasoning. Following on

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[219] Martin Luther King Jr., *MLK: Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence,* The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, 4th April 1967, video file posted 6th July 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJhgXKGldUk. Accessed 8th August 2023.

[220] J. Edgar Hoover, statement before the Kerner Commission, 1st August 1967 meeting of National Advisory Commission On Civil Disorders, including FBI report on racial disturbances, Folder: 001346-001-0034, Commission Meetings [Series 1], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-001-0034&accountid=7408.Accessed 13th June 2023.

[221] Ibid.

[222] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 9.

from the testimony by Hoover, Kerner acknowledged that "we found no evidence of any conspiracy anywhere," however, he continued, "We always found individuals who came out and said "I did it. I told you it would happen. They would come out to gain status, I suppose, but these matters are completely unpredictable."[223] The commission's final report also stated that they believed that individuals and militant groups, "sought to encourage violence, and that they helped to create an atmosphere that contributed to the outbreak of disorder."[224] These statements, regarding elements of society that encouraged unrest, did acknowledge Johnson's irrational fears of an organised conspiracy. However, it was insignificant as Johnson was beset on the cause of the riots anyway. He had determined that various plots were the cause, and he was annoyed that his commission did not find the evidence to support that conclusion.

Finally, other events during 1968 did little to dissuade Johnson of his opinion that everyone from liberals, black Americans, conservatives, and communists were out to get him. A B-52 crash in Greenland on 22nd January, the capture of the USS Pueblo on 23rd January, the Tet Offensive, and the battle of Khe Sanh further raised Johnson's suspicions of a communist strategy to defeat the United States.[225] When the commission presented him with a finished report, the president had adopted a siege mentality within the White House. Johnson's delusions were far from solely restricted to the riots, with White House staff having to endure his rants on the Vietnam War as well. It was only when Clifford became Secretary of Defense that he managed to get Johnson to go against what Bernstein called "the comforting fantasies of his paranoia to face the harsh realities of the war."[226] All of these struggles evidenced Johnson's deteriorating mental state. Bernstein says he "had great

[223] Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty, *Hearings on S. 3063 To Provide Employment and Training Opportunities for Low-Income and Unemployed Persons, S. 3249 To Provide a Comprehensive National Manpower Policy, To Improve the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962, to Authorize a Community Service Employment Program, and for Other Purposes, S. 2938 To Extend Certain Expiring Provisions Under the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962*, *as Amended,* 90th Congr., 2nd sess., 1968, 97, entitlementkeys=1234|app-gis|hearing|hrg-1968-lpw-0012 (proquest.com). Accessed 13th June 2023.
[224] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 9-10.
[225] Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* 473.
[226] Ibid., 490.

trouble distinguishing between truth and falsehoods."[227] Consequently, when unchallenged, Johnson chose to believe his own narratives..

The Most Difficult Question to Answer: Economic Factors

One of the fundamental conflicts in Johnson's mind was the debate over economics. His Great Society spending demonstrated that he was prone to pledging massive amounts of money to domestic programs. However, in 1968, the economic impact of Vietnam could no longer be hidden, and the president was left with a dilemma for which he did not have a solution.

Johnson struggled to grapple with the commission's calls for increased spending at a time when Congress tightened the purse strings on his programmes. Therefore, he had economic considerations on his mind as he made his decision on the commission. The 90th Congress (1967-1969) did not accommodate Johnson's domestic agenda as much as the 89th (1965-1967). In the call with Daley, he blamed Lindsay for his suggestion to "hire two and a half million people on federal payroll."[228] Another feature of the Kerner Commission that took Johnson aback was their recommendation to, "Take immediate action to create 2 million new jobs over the next 3 years."[229] The sub-committee of which Robert Kennedy was a member (The Senate Subcommittee for Employment, Manpower and Poverty) supported the commission's plans, which were similar to the proposed legislation the committee was pushing. Consequently, Senator Joseph Clark (D-PA) called Kerner, Lindsay, and Harris to testify in Congress. The commissioners were under no illusions that "the principal burden for funding the programs we have proposed will fall upon the Federal Government."[230] Johnson, who was battling to get a tax bill passed at the time of the report's release, would have been pleased if he had absorbed the information in detail that the report did

[227] Ibid., 539-540.
[228] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard J. Daley on 13 March 1968."
[229] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 25.
[230] Ibid., 451.

state, “the taxing resources available at this level are far from adequate.”[231] The tax issue illustrated another barrier Johnson had to overcome if he supported the report.

Harris believed that the question of financing the proposals “was as difficult as any the commission had to answer.”[232] What underscored this difficulty was the Vietnam War. The commission was forced to grapple with the reality that any robust legislation depended on the finances allocated to the war effort. However, the commission decided not to address the war despite acknowledging that it was entwined “psychologically and economically in the problem of civil disorder.”[233] In these hearings, Robert Kennedy questioned the rationality behind proposing comprehensive new social programmes when the war was at its height, “Do you think with the conditions that exist currently in our country and with the continuation of the war in Southeast Asia that it is possible to implement enough of the recommendations of this report to do what you think needs to be done to head off greater difficulty and trouble in this country?”[234] Harris and the commission’s decision to treat the war as a “separate issue” was ultimately not feasible due to the plain economic reality of the war costs.[235]

He did not Understand: Lyndon Johnson’s View on Politics

Johnson’s struggle with the evolving nature of the civil rights movement throughout his presidency evidenced his tendency to neglect non-political solutions. The civil rights movement in itself was not a single movement with a single goal. Therefore, it was difficult for Johnson, who was very much a man of his time, to comprehend the situation. He believed that legislation was the answer to America’s problems. Johnson saw things differently from many of his contemporaries and only wanted to know how to get bills passed that remedied the country’s issues. Charles Schultze served as Johnson’s Director of the Bureau of the Budget until 28th January 1968. He recalled having

[231] Ibid., 452.
[232] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 124.
[233] Ibid., 125.
[234] Ibid., 126-127.
[235] Ibid., 127.

difficulties getting Johnson to accept that his programmes had longer-term budgetary consequences.[236] Nevertheless, Johnson worked tirelessly in pursuit of his goals. Schultze observed how the president "relaxed in ways that would tire me."[237] Johnson's work ethic could never be questioned; however, he was a demanding man to work with for those who did not share his vision.[238] Regardless of how he worked, Johnson's opinions on how to solve the problem of urban poverty were no longer aligned with civil rights leaders or supporters. Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr. had since ended a marriage of convenience that had previously seen them achieve their shared goals from their "productive relationship."[239]

As the equal rights battle changed, Johnson shunned black leaders who did not share his vision or who disagreed with his views. For example, James Farmer, Director of the Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE), was one black leader with whom Johnson fell out. Farmer stated that when he refused to cease demonstrations during the election period of 1964 (at Johnson's request), the personal calls and the ability for Farmer to reach the president stopped.[240] Again, Johnson had let his pique cloud his working relationships with black leaders who disagreed with him. In addition, after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, where *de jure* segregation was effectively wiped from the land, he did not understand that future action on civil rights would focus on alleviating *de facto* segregation. Years of Jim Crow laws in the South had far-reaching effects that reinforced this in the American psyche. For Johnson, an ingrained problem on such a scale was a tricky concept to accept;

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[236] Charles L. Schultze, interview by David McComb, April 10, 1969, Washington D.C.. interview II transcript, Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part I: The White House and Executive Departments, National Archives and Records Administration. Oral history transcript, Charles L. Schultze, interview 2 (II), 4/10/1969, by David G. McComb · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 13th June 2023.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Peniel E. Joseph, "The Great Society and the Beloved Community: Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Partnership That Transformed a Nation," in *LBJ'S America: The Life and Legacies of Lyndon Baines Johnson,* eds. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Mark K. Updegrove, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024), 119.
[240] James Farmer, interview by Paige Mulhollan, 20th July 1971, interview 2 transcript, Reel 8 of 18, Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration Part 1: The White House and the Executive Departments, University Publications of America, Bethesda, MD, accessed at Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middleburg, The Netherlands.

politics was his life and his passion. The Kerner Commission spoke in a foreign language to Johnson; for him, he had eliminated the legal barriers of segregation, and the rioters and advocates of Black Power, who spoke a further, different language, saw things differently.[241] Johnson struggled with abstract issues that did not have a legislative remedy. The Kerner Commission's problem was that it presented Johnson with an abstract issue.

The commission's condemnation of white racism was more vigorous than Johnson had anticipated. With his political mind, Johnson did not want to condemn the entirety of white society. Whitney Young deduced that the report's conclusion "shook him up as it has practically everybody."[242] Young believed this was partially behind Johnson's first reactions when receiving the report.[243] This conclusion went against his "natural political and public relations instincts."[244] With Johnson being such a natural politician, it remained difficult for him to overlook his initial thoughts on a matter.

Johnson's previous record during his presidency suggested he might have embraced the Kerner Report. For instance, Farmer praised Johnson for his civil rights record as president; he witnessed first-hand "the Johnson treatment" and described his methods: "He was cajoling, he was threatening, everything else – whatever tactic was required with that certain individual, he was using."[245] Farmer saw this as Johnson's determination to make a mark on history, and he believed the president recognised civil rights as a way of doing so. However, Farmer noted that as a senator, politics was Johnson's motivation; when he spoke of the president's time in the Senate, Farmer felt Johnson acted out of "political expediency."[246]

[241] Lawson, "Mixing Moderation with Militancy: Lyndon Johnson and African-American Leadership," 104.
[242] Young, 18th June 1969, interview 1 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Farmer, interview 2, Reel 8 of 18, Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration.
[246] Ibid.

Johnson was a political maestro. However, he focused almost solely on the legislative moves that would help him get ahead. As Senate Majority Leader, he helped push the Civil Rights Act of 1957. He refused to sign the Southern Manifesto after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, being one of only three Southern senators to do so. However, these decisions might likely have been taken because of his designs on a presidential bid in 1960; as Robert Caro summarised, "compassion and ambition had finally come into alignment."[247] On the other hand, Farmer would consider Johnson's compassion and ambition examples of "political expediency."[248] Johnson was not alone in how he used his power. Suri observed, "Lyndon Johnson relished his power to manipulate people, but he was hardly unique in his need to do so."[249] Johnson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt all faced comparable dilemmas when balancing the nation's needs for war and domestic support, which required a great deal of political expediency to solve.[250]

Johnson acted out of political expediency in his response to the Kerner Report as well. He saw nothing to be gained; his ambition had gone, and his compassion, broken after perceived slights, had also departed. Farmer observed a change in Johnson's attitude toward civil rights from 1965; as the conflict in Vietnam further absorbed the president, Farmer believed his other projects were "pushed to the back burner."[251] As evidence to his point, he cited Vice President Hubert Humphrey's move away from leading civil rights projects in the administration and that the official who informed him of the changes, Lee White, when questioned, "Protested too much."[252] Such a move demonstrated that Johnson had made a politically expedient choice and showed that after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the rhetoric of his Great Society did not match the updated goals of civil rights leaders such as Farmer and King.[253]

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[247] Caro, *The Passage of Power*,9.
[248] Farmer, interview 2, Reel 8 of 18, Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration.
[249] Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office*, xvii.
[250] Ibid., xvi.
[251] Farmer, interview 2, Reel 8 of 18, Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Joseph, "The Great Society and the Beloved Community: Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Partnership That Transformed a Nation," 106-107.

Johnson also needed to understand the nature of the people he had asked his commission to study. His choices for black representation on the commission prove that he did not. Edward Brookes was a Republican senator, and Roy Wilkins was a Johnson loyalist. Even after the commission had received its public shunning from the president, Wilkins believed in Johnson. Wilkins still backed the president despite his disappointment with Johnson's reaction.[254] In remarks to the national press club on 2nd April 1968, Wilkins lavished praise on the outgoing president for his civil rights record, "This man has been better in pronouncement and in performance on America's old and emotional problem of race than any other president in our history."[255] Wilkins' allegiance to Johnson was based upon his belief that life for black Americans had improved under his watch.[256] Wilkins had offered similar praise to President Harry Truman, telling the then-president in a letter, "As you leave the White House you carry with you the gratitude and affectionate regard of millions of your Negro fellow citizens."[257] Offering a different perspective, Farmer questioned whether Johnson understood black Americans, especially "the angry young blacks who would tell it like it is, and call him a MF."[258] Farmer noted how Johnson conversed with civil rights leaders, such as Wilkins, who possessed a middle-class viewpoint.[259] Another weakness in Johnson's handling of the situation was his tendency to be paternalistic; as Farmer acknowledged, "paternalism doesn't live very well with angry young black militants."[260] Farmer attributed this to Johnson's Southern heritage; he was

[254] Roy Wilkins interview by T.H. Baker, 1st April 1969, interview 1 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Oral history transcript, Roy Wilkins, interview 1 (I), 4/1/1969, by T.H. Baker · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 15th September 2023.
[255] Roy Wilkins, Remarks of Roy Wilkins to The National Press Club 2nd April 1968, Kerner Commission member Roy Wilkins, executive director, NAACP, 27th July 1967-2nd April 1968, Folder: 001346-014-0872, General Subject File of the Office of Information [Series 39], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-014-0872&accountid=7408. Accessed 13th June 2023.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Roy Wilkins, *Roy Wilkins to Harry Truman, January 12, 1953,* Letter, From Harry Truman Presidential Library, *Correspondence between Harry S. Truman and Roy Wilkins,* Correspondence Between Harry S. Truman and Roy Wilkins | Harry S. Truman (trumanlibrary.gov). Accessed on 14th September 2023.
[258] Farmer, interview 2, Reel 8 of 18, Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration.
[259] Ibid.
[260] Ibid.

the first president who fully embraced his Southern roots since Andrew Johnson.[261] Despite his natural compassion and empathy for black Americans, Johnson spoke like a Southerner when he felt the need arise. He, like many other politicians of the time, including Nixon, regularly used racist and demeaning language and adjusted this to his audience as he saw fit.

After another summer of riots in 1966, Johnson called Associate Justice Abe Fortas on 3rd October. The president had appointed Fortas to the United States Supreme Court but continued to call upon his fellow Southerner as an advisor. Johnson urged Fortas and the court to investigate the riots, "Now y'all gonna do anything on law and order this session?"[262] In this conversation, Johnson mentioned the riots' political impact on him. He spoke about how his political analyst Cliff Carter had reported that it was the issue with the most significant detrimental effect on his poll numbers, "My god, we've got riots in all the major cities and it's knocked our polls down 15%."[263] Further on in the call, Johnson used a racist slur and mused about a conviction for "that damn Carmichael."[264] The conversation with Fortas showed how Johnson had identified the potential for the riots to hurt politically a full year before the commission and sought a hard-line solution after the unrest in 1966. His use of slurs and the phrase "law and order" displayed a different side to the president than the man who passed critical civil rights legislation. He was a consummate political operator but still came from the South.

The Robert Kennedy Factor

Unfortunately for Lyndon Johnson, one man was all that Johnson was not, a man who saw politics a lot differently than he did, his bitter nemesis Robert F. Kennedy. Johnson's longtime ally and Ambassador to Australia, Edward Clark, noted the two men "hated each other more than they did

[261] Ibid.
[262] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Abe Fortas on 3 October 1966," Telephone Conversation # 10912, sound recording, LBJ and Abe Fortas, 3/10/1966, 8:16AM, Recordings and Transcripts of Telephone Conversations and Meetings, (LBJ Presidential Library) URL: https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/tel-10912. Accessed on 17th June 2023.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Ibid.

anybody else in the world."[265] A man from a privileged upbringing and Harvard educated, the New York Senator was central to Johnson's feelings of inadequacy and isolation in the administration of John F. Kennedy.[266] He rarely missed an opportunity to voice his frustration and hatred of the heir to the Kennedy legacy. The disdain was shared from Kennedy's side; the side-lining and ridiculing of Johnson was most evident during the latter's time as vice president.[267]

In 1968, with the power dynamics shifted, the two men clashed again over the Kerner Commission. Johnson dismissed Kennedy's public criticisms and did everything he could to avoid being seen following the advice and viewpoints of his sworn enemy. Kennedy, for his part, used the Kerner Commission and Johnson's public silence on the issue as a reason for why he entered the Democratic Primaries on 16th March 1968. Kennedy was far from alone; the commission gave liberals who opposed Johnson on Vietnam the evidence they needed to prove he had neglected his domestic responsibilities. By the time Kennedy and McCarthy challenged him, Johnson's brand of liberalism was not consistent with their wing of the party. Johnson had seen even some of his closest advisors hold views more closely aligned with Kennedy than himself.

Kennedy's entrance into the race was his attempt at filling the void of leadership at the top of the Democratic Party. Johnson had admonished any responsibility for the social programmes the commission backed. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a key Kennedy aide who helped Robert Kennedy in his 1968 campaign, believed that the Vietnam War remained the principal reason for Kennedy's decision to run.[268] However, he was keen to note that it was not just the war; Kennedy's aversion to Johnson's domestic policies was also behind his entry into the contest.[269] Schlesinger identified

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[265] Edward Clark, Interview by Robert Dallek, 15th December 1986, Austin, TX, transcript, . LBJ Library Oral Histories. Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library. Oral history transcript, Edward Clark, interview S-I, 12/15/1986, by Robert Dallek · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org).
[266] Caro, *The Passage of Power,* 247-249.
[267] Ibid., 248.
[268] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., interview by Joe B. Frantz, 4th November 1971, transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Oral history transcript, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., interview 1 (I), 11/4/1971, by Joe B. Frantz · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org).
[269] Ibid.

Johnson's handling of the Kerner Commission as one such domestic reason: "But the other issue was the whole domestic thing. He was very much disappointed, for example, in Johnson's reaction to the Kerner Report. He felt that the cities, that civil rights, poverty, the minorities had been neglected as a consequence of Johnson's obsession with the war. But, of course, all that was derivative from the war."[270]

Another trusted Kennedy aide, former Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, also named the Kerner Commission as a reason Robert Kennedy entered the primaries. In his oral history account, Salinger recalled, "Generally, when he finally announced, he had specific reasons in, you know, the Kerner Reports, and some other things, that he could use as specific reasons for running."[271] Finally, Ted Sorensen, who had served as one of John F. Kennedy's key advisors and later helped with his brother's 1968 campaign, concluded that although the Tet Offensive was the principal reason for the younger Kennedy's entry into the contest, "The Kerner Commission report was one of many secondary things that sort of added up to his frustration and despair."[272] These accounts show that as far asRobert Kennedy was concerned, the blame for not acting on the Kerner Commission rested on Lyndon Johnson. He backed that belief up and entered the presidential election. Furthermore, it shows indisputably that liberals and New Frontiersmen blamed Johnson for not initially acting on the commission.

In a meeting with Robert Kennedy and Nicholas Katzenbach, the former Attorney General and, as of 1966, Under Secretary of State, Johnson showed how unreasonable he could be. Katzenbach had also served as one of John F. Kennedy's important figureheads on civil rights, as he worked as Deputy Attorney General under Robert. Katzenbach recalled that a story emerged in Paris

[270] Ibid.
[271] Pierre E. Salinger, Interview by Larry J. Hackman, 26th May 1969, New York, NY, interview 1 transcript, Series 1. Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Interviews, 1969-1981, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Salinger, Pierre E. G.: Oral History Interview - RFK #1, 5/26/1969 | JFK Library.
[272] Theodore C. Sorensen, Interview by Larry J. Hackman, 21st March 1969, New York, NY, interview 1 transcript, Series 1. Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Interviews, 1969-1981, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Sorensen, Theodore C.: Oral History Interview - RFK #1, 3/21/1969 | JFK Library.

about a "peace feeler on Vietnam to Bobby."[273] For his part, Kennedy denied ever knowing this. However, Johnson sent Katzenbach to the Senate to speak with Kennedy and subsequently summoned them both to the White House on 6th February 1967.[274] He shouted at Kennedy, "It's your State Department."[275] It was implied this was directed at Katzenbach, who believed that the verbal assaults were "awful" and that "Johnson was at the absolute worst."[276] Katzenbach recalled that this was an example of the nastiest aspects of Johnson's personality, "Lyndon Johnson had trouble remembering what the truth was."[277] Kennedy told McNamara about the meeting and recalled that Johnson threatened, "The war will be over this year, and when it is, I'll destroy you and every one of your dove friends. You'll be politically dead in six months."[278] Johnson and Kennedy's relationship would split the Democrats and sink any hope of ghetto renewal. Johnson's mind was focused on the war and his petty rivalries rather than the Kerner Report.

In the following year, with his belief that Johnson was "incorrigible" reinforced, Kennedy launched a direct attack on the president.[279] In the key Senate Hearings on 13th March 1968, he blamed Johnson for not embracing the Kerner Commission. In these hearings, as Kerner and Harris testified, Kennedy verbally assailed Johnson whilst simultaneously praising the commission's work.[280] The distinction between Kennedy's reaction and that of the president was clear. Undoubtedly, Kennedy was politically motivated: the hearings were three days from when he announced his entry into the presidential contest. Therefore, they helped draw distinctions between himself and the embattled president. In his opening remarks of the hearings, Kennedy extolled the commission report, calling it "one of the most important studies made in the history of the

[273] Nicholas Katzenbach, interview by Stephen Knott, Kent Germany and Paul Martin, 29th November 2005. Princeton, NJ, transcript, Edward M. Kennedy Oral History Project. Nicholas Katzenbach Oral History (emkinstitute.org).
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.
[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.
[278] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam,* 260
[279] Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson and Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968,* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), 118.
[280] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 109.

country."[281] Moreover, he indirectly critiqued Johnson and his domestic agenda, as he asked: "Why is it that despite the concern that people have about these problems and despite the fact we passed legislation dealing with many of these difficulties in education, manpower training and other fields, but the situation still seems to be getting worse rather than better?"[282]

Remarkably, throughout these hearings, Johnson's handpicked committee chairman became a pawn for the political aspirations of his greatest adversary. Kennedy's persistent questioning of Kerner continued, and the Illinois governor acted as a somewhat weaker substitute for Johnson. The New York senator questioned whether existing programmes that the Johnson administration had pushed through Congress were satisfactory.[283] Kennedy knew that Johnson had delayed acknowledging the report and all but ignored it. Kennedy's questioning implied that he meant to use this knowledge to attack the president. Throughout this exchange, Kerner does not support Johnson as much as the president would have hoped from his chairman; ultimately, he conceded that "it is not completely satisfactorily" when Kennedy pressured again on the effectiveness of Great Society legislation.[284] Kennedy had gotten Johnson's chairman to all but call for increased spending. He painted a picture of a failing administration in his arguments, citing the increasing money spent on education and job training programmes that yielded little results; he labelled himself "pessimistic."[285] He directed these attacks Johnson's way, laying the blame at the feet of the president, stating, "People are feeling more bitter, more disillusioned than they did a decade or 5 or 6 or 7 years ago."[286] For Johnson, open, unfavourable comparisons between him and the 35th president were the attacks he most feared, hence his initial efforts to bring the John F. Kennedy loyalists onside at the beginning of his presidency. Kennedy's statements were the beginning of the themes present throughout his presidential campaign.

[281] Ibid., 109-112.
[282] Ibid., 109.
[283] Ibid., 112.
[284] Ibid., 112.
[285] Ibid., 111.
[286] Ibid., 111.

When he spoke at the Cleveland City Club a month later, on 5th April 1968, Kennedy offered another tacit criticism of the president. His speech also referenced Lincoln's second inaugural address, where the 16th president pledged "to bind up the nation's wounds," after the Civil War.[287] At the time of the address, Kennedy's campaign had pressed on, and Johnson had exited the race. The speech was heavy on emotive perspective as it was given a day after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The address showed how Kennedy set himself apart as the candidate who offered the United States the best chance to bridge the divides and "bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again."[288] Knowing Kennedy's feelings and opinions on Johnson, he offered what could be interpreted as another tacit criticism, "Some look for scapegoats, others look for conspiracies."[289] However, Kennedy's comments regarding racial equality and urban unrest provided an insight into his views on race and prospects for future grand plans, "Violence breeds violence, repression brings retaliation, and only a cleaning of our whole society can remove this sickness from our soul."[290] His speech embraced the same spirit as the Kerner Report.

In addition, Johnson was insecure when it came to the nostalgia that remained for his slain predecessor. He knew this was one of the main factors that droveRobert Kennedy's candidacy. He often compared himself to the man he replaced, usually in response to criticism from Robert Kennedy. In his call with Daley, he sought to differentiate his financial efforts on the cities from that of John F. Kennedy, "When I came in, Kennedy had a budget 97 billion. My budget tonight's 187."[291] Again, filled with self-pity, LBJ compared his financial commitment to JFK's, in the cities $22 billion instead of $9 billion.[292] Johnson's complaints served as his response to Robert Kennedy's public

[287] Abraham Lincoln, "March 4, 1865 Second Inaugural Address," transcript of speech delivered at Washington, D.C. 4th March 1865, March 4, 1865: Second Inaugural Address | Miller Center. Accessed 24th January 2024.
[288] Robert F. Kennedy, "Remarks to the Cleveland City Club," transcript of speech delivered at Cleveland City Club, Cleveland OH, 5th April 1968, Papers of Robert F. Kennedy Senate Papers, Speeches and Press Releases, Box 4, "4/1/68-4/10/68, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Remarks to the Cleveland City Club, April 5, 1968 | JFK Library. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid.
[291] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard J. Daley on 13 March 1968."
[292] Ibid.

criticism of his attitude toward the Kerner Report in the Senate earlier that day. Johnson ended his call with Daley aghast and recounted how he sent Califano to discuss the cities with RFK, only for Kennedy to lecture his aide.[293] Johnson finished his story with a summary of Kennedy's campaign efforts ahead of his entry into the race.[294] From this call, which sometimes descended into a rant, Johnson is seen to be at his most vulnerable. Backed into a political corner, Johnson, with his ego, did not want to be seen as cowering to Kennedy's demands; he remained almost solely focused on RFK's criticism on his call with Daley. In seeking to defend his record, Johnson is initially determined not to back the commission as it would mean supporting something that Kennedy had advocated. In his biographical look at the feud between the two men, Jeff Shesol concluded that "if changing policies meant conceding Bobby's point, Lyndon Johnson would stay the course."[295] Johnson's opposition to the commission had hardened, and it seemed he would not budge.

Robert Kennedy was far from alone regarding Johnson's inability to support the commission. Hubert Humphrey shared Kennedy's bafflement. Humphrey's oral history account in 1970 showed how opposition to Johnson's treatment of the commission came from within his inner circle. Humphrey's responses to the interviewer, Larry Hackman, are enlightening and worth quoting in full:

> "Hackman: One of the other things that I gather the two of you felt the same on was the Kerner Commission (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders) report to some degree anyway."
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> "Humphrey: Absolutely"
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> "Hackman: Do you remember ever discussing that with him?"

[293] Ibid.
[294] Ibid.
[295] Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy and the Feud That Defined a Decade,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 470.

> "Humphrey: Yes. Yes, I sure do. And we both felt very strongly about the Kerner Commission report. And I talked to him one time about the possibility of getting a separate committee in the Congress to try and follow that up. And I think he had something like that in mind. I've forgotten, there was some speech that he made somewhere along the line pointing out that the trouble with these reports was that they came and they went and there needed to be some follow up on it. And of course a lot of the things that he was doing in the hearings on the housing and on the cities related to the Kerner Commission report. We were kindred souls all the way down the line on the Kerner Commission."[296]

Humphrey's answer is proof of the disaffect between Johnson and his administration on the commission. Further evidence of this was Secretary of Health Education and Welfare John W. Gardner's testimony to the Kerner Commission. Gardner blamed the riots on overpopulated, geographically constricted, and overcrowded areas that black Americans lived in within the large cities.[297] As Johnson cut the report's funding and sought to distance himself at different points throughout the commission's lifespan, Gardner's statements would do much to supplement the commission's final report. Meanwhile, Johnson's own vice president held discussions with his arch-rival about doing the opposite. Humphrey declaring himself "kindred souls" with Kennedy showed how the problems lay with the president and how far Johnson had moved away from the liberal wing of his party as he tried to remove the report from political discourse.[298]

As Johnson's political powers declined, Califano remarked, "Robert Kennedy found fault with something in almost every proposal LBJ put forward."[299] Kennedy's significance to this thesis lies in

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[296] Hubert H. Humphrey, Interview by Larry J. Hackman, 30th March 1970, Washington, D.C., transcript, Series 1. Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Interviews, 1969-1981, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Humphrey, Hubert H.: Oral History Interview - RFK #1, 3/30/1970 | JFK Library. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[297] John W. Gardner, John W. Gardner, draft testimony before the Kerner Commission, 1st August 1967, Folder: 001346-016-0935, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-016-0935&accountid=7408. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[298] Humphrey, Interview, 30th March 1970, transcript, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.
[299] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House* Years, 260.

his seeking the Democratic nomination, promising a new kind of politics to the one Johnson espoused in the late 1960s. Kennedy pledged to do more for equal rights and to tackle poverty. Johnson was bewildered and resented the younger Kennedy, who served as a reminder that "despite all he was doing for blacks, he could not elicit from them the passionate response they gave Robert Kennedy."[300] Through his family name, Kennedy represented what was good about the past; in his politics, he represented what could be in the future. Conversely, Johnson was a politician of the past.

Accepting the Failings of the Great Society

Another factor that further hardened Johnson's views on the commission's report was its challenge to his domestic reputation. The Great Society was Johnson's pride and joy; however, in his eyes, the Kerner Commission threatened its legacy. The president took this as a personal affront to his achievements. He felt trapped between a more resistant Congress on one side and a commission and liberals on the other that requested something more significant and bolder than what had gone before. As Senator Winston Prouty (R-VT) observed, "The problem isn't getting any better despite many of these programs having been in existence for some time."[301] Prouty could have been referring to the Office of Economic Opportunity, the focus of much of the War on Poverty's funds. However, the OEO did not possess the ability to make a lasting impact on reducing poverty. Prouty had a liberal voting record on civil rights issues but believed Johnson's poverty programmes had not gone far enough.

The need to expand and reform specific programmes in the Great Society echoed the criticisms of people such as Robert Kennedy and even the appointed commissioners. In the same Senate hearings, Kerner noted, "We have been talking, but we have not been producing, and the programs that we have had actually we have just scratched the surface."[302] Kerner was correct to make that statement; the anti-poverty programmes the administration pushed had done much good

[300] Ibid., 210.
[301] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 122.
[302] Ibid., 95.

but were far from all-encompassing. When Johnson recruited his commission and hand-picked his chosen team, he did not want to hear that his Great Society was insufficient.

Johnson disregarded the commission in part due to their unreasonable expectations. Thus, he was responsible for the report's recommendations not being acted upon. The damage, in part, is a fault of the commission. Its commissioners did not face the same difficult political situation that Johnson did. Kerner declined to run for re-election, and Johnson later awarded him a federal judgeship. Lindsay used the report as a political vehicle as he sought to create a national profile. Hence, he pushed for the commission to take a stronger stance than it did on Vietnam as a means of paying for the suggestions. Ultimately, the commission backed down on such proposals. Abel, Thornton, Jenkins, and Wilkins faced no significant political pressure as they were not politicians. Those who were active politicians faced little reaction. Harris was not up for re-election until 1972 (when he withdrew and launched two unsuccessful runs for president). Corman served until 1981 when he lost re-election; Brooke until 1979; and McCulloch served until 1973 when he declined to run again. Peden was the member whose involvement had the most extensive consequences for her, as she lost her bid for the Senate. Despite her defeat, Peden believed that her membership on the commission had not been the reason.[303] When her opponent attempted to use the report against her, Peden skilfully did not shy away and backed the report "in front of television, at civic club speeches. I would take along the commission report and hold it up and say, 'The statements in here, I stand by.'"[304] Understandably, considering their lack of peril, Johnson's animosity toward the commission and commissioners increased; he felt he could not do more, whereas they could produce a final report that ultimately had little negative impact on them.

Jacob Javits (R-NY) and Clark were also disappointed that Johnson had not been more supportive of the bill in public, as on the 13th March, two weeks after publication, they agreed with

[303] Peden, interview transcript. National Archives and Records Administration.
[304] Ibid.

Kennedy when he lamented, “We still haven’t had a word from the executive branch of the Government as to how important it is to take action.”[305] Javits and Clark subsequently urged Johnson to make a public show of support for the report.[306] At the very least, they had hoped to apply political pressure on the president. Javits noted that Johnson’s help was needed to give an agenda, based upon the findings of the Kerner Commission, what he termed “a foundation for a program in the Congress.”[307] As this was not forthcoming from the White House, those members of Congress who might have supported measures could not support action. Despite a direct congressional plea, Johnson actively ignored the report at first and chose to play a part in its failure. Javits’ support for the Commission is notable as it demonstrated the support action in the cities still held among some of the more liberal members of the Republican Party. Javits, a liberal Northeastern Republican from New York, strongly supported civil rights and helped lead (alongside Kennedy and Ribicoff) efforts to challenge the Johnson administration on its efforts to tackle the problem of the cities through its Model Cities legislation.[308]

Johnson proved his vice president's and the senators' fears were well-founded. Johnson’s initial response confused many of his aides and liberal allies. His opposition was even more perplexing, as the Kerner Commission was a natural extension of the Great Society. As Manfred Berg summarised, “Yet for all its drastic language, the 600-page report, in essence, epitomised the spirit and approach of 1960s liberalism.”[309]

Indecisiveness vs. Impossible Decisions

At his lowest, Lyndon Johnson was prone to being indecisive and letting fear dictate his actions. On the other hand, from the very moment he was thrust into office, Johnson had to contend with

[305] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 128.
[306] Ibid., 128.
[307] Ibid., 128.
[308] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 320.
[309] Manfred Berg, “1968: A Turning Point in American Race Relations,” in *1968: The World Transformed*, eds. Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert and Detlef Junker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 404.

decisions concerning his domestic policies and the war that were nearly impossible to get ideal results from. Johnson is not unique because every president before and after him faced decisions with no clear positive outcomes. However, Johnson tended to choose the path of least resistance. As Bator noted, when faced with such a decision to make over Vietnam, Johnson significantly increased the number of American troops stationed in the country, as, at the time, this was the politically expedient choice.[310] Caro observed that his political skills abandoned him when he worried about failing.[311] His fear was notably visible in his presidential runs in 1960 and '64. In 1960, he dithered and delayed, unwilling to actively look as though he wanted the presidency. He declined prime speaking invites and refused to be discussed as a candidate.[312] He did not want to campaign and be labelled a failure if he lost.

In 1964, after his ascension to the office he had long believed to be his destiny, his extreme negativity and tendency to self-sabotage led him to tell his close aides and family he would not seek election in his own right. As the row over the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) threatened to take over the Democratic National Convention, Johnson acted "hysterical."[313] In a conversation with his close aide Walter W. Jenkins during the Convention, Johnson told him he would not run. His state of mind was affected, and he worried about ending up in the same situation as Wilson, who was struck down with a severe stroke at the end of his presidency, "I don't want to be in this place like Woodrow Wilson. And I do not believe I can physically and mentally carry the responsibilities."[314] Jenkins and Johnson discussed the practicalities of his withdrawal; when his aide asked if he would make the announcement, Johnson interrupted, "*If* I'm going to do it? I'm going to do it. I told you that."[315] Johnson had changed his mind again in a matter of days and was

[310] Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," 334.
[311] Caro, *The Passage of Power*, 163.
[312] Ibid.,23-26.
[313] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 163.
[314] "Lyndon Johnson and Walter Jenkins on 25 August 1964," Conversation WH6408-36- 5177, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition,* Lyndon B. Johnson: Civil Rights, Vietnam, and the War on Poverty, ed. David G. Coleman, Kent B. Germany, Guian A. McKee, and Marc J. Selverstone, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–), URL: http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4002593. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[315] Ibid.

renominated. Johnson often used self-pity as a tactic in his time as vice president, and it can be inferred that these moments of apparent dejection were actually a cue for advisors to express support for him.[316] Johnson needed validation. He needed to be told he was the best candidate, the only man for the job.

In addition, these examples demonstrate that Johnson had an indecisive personality that sometimes combined with defeatist tendencies or the ability to manipulate others through pity. He seemingly told his aides and confidants one thing and later did the opposite. Johnson's indecisiveness at important moments was a key reason why he delayed even acknowledging the Kerner Report. The Kerner Commission had, like Vietnam, placed Johnson in an unenviable position where whatever he did could never have pleased everyone. In his inaction, in making a passive choice, Johnson pleased no one.

In March 1968, the difficult decisions he had to make daily had a significant impact on Johnson's mentality. Furthermore, it became apparent that the situation had also taken a toll on his physical health. Thirteen years prior, in 1955, he had suffered a heart attack where his chances of survival were rated at "fifty – fifty."[317] In 1968, he feared a repeat of this heart attack or the type of stroke that afflicted Wilson. For Johnson, the similarities between him and Wilson were even more apparent than when he fretted with Jenkins in 1964. Wilson had also lost congressional support on foreign policy for his proposed League of Nations, and the United States did not sign up. For Johnson, congressional criticism of his handling of the war came from the right and the left. Johnson's family perhaps privately encouraged him to go no further.

Furthermore, it was clear that Johnson did not trust many people and saw enemies on all sides. His distrust of his advisors was shown in his response to a story in *The New York Times* that alleged indecision in the administration with regard to Westmoreland's request for more troops. The

[316] Caro, *The Passage of Power*, 195.
[317] Ibid., 315.

information was not a leak; the story was gathered by reporters who got the information from multiple sources, including Johnson himself.[318] Ironically, he remained obsessed with secrecy and utilised his brutal political techniques to maintain it.[319] He remained ensconced in the White House, a shell of the mighty politician he had once been. All of these factors were undoubtedly in Johnson's mind as he weighed ending his political career and casting aside the Kerner Report.

In two phone calls around the time he began to accept the Commission, one with Russell and another with Secretary of the Treasury Henry H. "Joe" Fowler, Johnson's low mood is displayed. Both men tried to boost Johnson's spirits but were unsuccessful. Russell, who had been a critical part of Johnson's political career, was by 1968 more distant from his *protégé* due to Johnson's push for civil rights legislation. An old "Dixiecrat" Russell had filibustered to oppose the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Also, he opposed Johnson's nomination of Abe Fortas as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court some months after this call. With little evidence, Johnson blamed Robert Kennedy for inciting race riots.[320] When he referred to Kennedy and Ribicoff, Johnson alleged, "Well they both started this riot business two years ago on television."[321] He added, "They're going to take the cities and they've been encouraging it and Bobby's been hiring Martin Luther King, raising money for him for two years, we've been watching it."[322] Russell urged a despondent Johnson to get a standing ovation at a university in Kansas or Alabama to lighten his mood.[323] Despite this, LBJ could not shake his sense of victimhood. A couple of days later, on 24th March, Johnson spoke with Fowler. Fowler remarked that Johnson could work the tax surcharge bill through the Senate; after all, he was "the master of the Senate."[324] A dejected Johnson replied, "That's not-I'm not master of a damn

[318] Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* 479-480.
[319] Ibid., 539.
[320] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Russell on 22 March 1968."
[321] Ibid.
[322] Ibid.
[323] Ibid.
[324] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Henry H. "Joe" Fowler on 24 March 1968," Conversation WH6803- 05-12844-12845-12846-12847, Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [Johnson Telephone Tapes: 1968, ed. Kent B. Germany, Nicole Hemmer, and Ken Hughes] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: "I'm Not a Master of Nothing" | The LBJ Telephone Tapes (lbjtapes.org). Accessed 18th June 2023.

thing."[325] In the first three months of 1968, Johnson had slipped into despair, unable to motivate himself for things he was previously passionate about. From these phone calls, Johnson appeared to be incapable of taking the actions he wanted to. The president's view had switched from anger to resignation.

However, the most significant evidence of Johnson's tendency to change his mind and appear indecisive came on the same day he spoke with Russell and ranted about the riots' origins. On the 22nd March, the president made his first public comments on the commission. In a press conference, Johnson appeared contemplative when he answered a question that Califano revealed had been "planted."[326] The question concerned the "disappointment" regarding his reaction to the report.[327] Oddly, Johnson felt the need to address the commission three weeks after its publication, hence the planted question, and after the public interest in the report had mainly died. Seemingly, the president had either changed his mind after pressure from the political left or sought to gain back control of the news coverage. In contrast to his private conversations with Russell and Daley, in public, Johnson claimed to have not heard much about the criticism he faced. He insisted, "We thought the report was a very thorough one, very comprehensive, and made many good recommendations. We did not agree with all the recommendations as certain statements have indicated."[328]

Rather than resort to personal criticisms or misgivings, as he had done privately, he laid the blame for rejecting the report on costing and funding issues in Congress.[329] Johnson also criticised the commission's lack of pragmatism: "A good many more recommendations we had incorporated into our cities message that had gone up and was pending. There was a difference in amounts, perhaps although they did not cost out theirs. I am not sure how much difference, but we could

[325] Ibid.
[326] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*, 262.
[327] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Lyndon B. Johnson Press Conference, March 22nd, 1968," The Johnson Presidential Press Conferences: Volume 2, (London: Heyden & Son, Ltd., 1978), 913-915, 914.
[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid.

recognise differences."[330] He continued to provide a specific example where he believed the commission had not considered their proposals, "Housing, for instance. We recommended all that we thought we could get the Congress to act upon – 6 million over this period of time – and it represented a great acceleration. The Commission felt it should be more."[331]

Regardless, Johnson stated that his administration was in lockstep with the commission. He admitted that "there is a general 'simpatico' of views, I think between the Cabinet officers who handle these programs and the recommendations of the commission. In some cases there is a different sum, and amounts and emphasis."[332] When he concluded his remarks, Johnson summarised his thoughts on the report, "I would not oppose more if we could get more and if we could get more funded. But we recommended what we thought we could build, realistically, and what we could get funded."[333] Johnson did not criticise any specific policy proposals in this public pronouncement. Instead, he focused on the cost issue.

Therefore, in public, Johnson had finally settled on money being the reason he cast the commission aside. Alongside his indecisive actions, Johnson was also a political pragmatist. He knew when he could not win. In his memoirs, Johnson recalled the difference of opinion he had with the commissioners and reflected on the financial burden upon him, "That was the problem – money."[334] He elaborated, "At that moment I received the report I was having one of the toughest fights of my life, trying to persuade Congress to pass the 10 per cent tax surcharge without imposing deep cuts in our most critical Great Society programs."[335] Although his private misgivings and denunciations are not openly revealed in his memoirs, Johnson's conclusion that Congress left him little room to act due to budgetary restrictions is an accurate interpretation.

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[330] Ibid.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Johnson, *Vantage Point,* 173.
[335] Ibid., 173.

In support of Johnson's defence was Charles Schultze. Schultze had left his role as Director of the Budget prior to when the final report was made public; therefore, he was not privy to any immediate discussions around the Kerner Commission. However, he still had first-hand experience of the administration's struggles with Congress and the ability to finance their agenda. Schultze remarked that Great Society legislation passed early in the Johnson presidency eventually proved costly to maintain.[336] Fundamentally, the support needed to continue with the Great Society services already in operation left very little room for any new domestic programmes, especially those the Kerner Commission advocated for.[337] Offering reasoning, Schultze observed, "It is always easier to cut back and hold down the growth of new programs, however how high a priority, than it is to take old, long established programs and cut them back."[338] The economic realities of Johnson's Great Society and war left him feeling he could not press a new agenda. Thus, it appeared he followed Schultze's direction and did not commit to any further programmes.

In addition to his press conference acknowledgement that the report deserved some acclaim, Johnson would later praise the report to select audiences, albeit in a limited fashion. In the weeks since the report's publication, he had begun to tailor his responses to different groups. In a meeting with black American newspaper editors and publishers, he called it "the most important report made to me since I have been president."[339] Clifford Alexander, who chaired the Equal Opportunity Commission under Johnson, was another who noticed Johnson's changed attitudes, as he embraced the commission as the most critical study he had established.[340] Johnson's thoughts on the commission grew more conciliatory in the weeks since it was apologetically delivered to him by Califano. However, as was typical, it was too little and too late. Any chance the report could have

[336] Schultze, April 10, 1969, interview II transcript, Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration.
[337] Ibid.
[338] Ibid.
[339] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, 259.
[340] Clifford L. Alexander, interview by Joe B. Frantz, 1st November 1971. Washington, D.C. transcript. Oral Histories of the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part I: The White House and Executive Departments. National Archives and Records Administration, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=002276-001-0085&accountid=7408. Accessed 30th June 2023.

effectively functioned as the most important of Johnson's presidency had passed. Despite his initial resentment, he never turned his private thoughts into open hostility against the commissioners. Johnson's improved mood is demonstrated when he later nominated Kerner for a judgeship and continued supporting Peden's Senate run, with First Lady Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson having made speeches for her.[341]

The commission put Johnson in a tough predicament. The president had been presented with a document he believed he could do very little about. The report and commissioners exhibited a grand plan without factoring in Johnson's finite political capital. The difficulty of taking such a position grew more apparent throughout the commission's lifespan. Johnson's defenders acknowledged as much; historian, biographer, and member of Johnson's staff, Doris Kearns Goodwin, observed how, "Johnson looked back to the previous summer and recalled the accusation he had chosen a partisan course during the Detroit riots. If he reacted strongly to civil disorders, he would be accused of currying favour on the right; if he reacted temperately, he would be vulnerable to the opposite charge."[342] Johnson faced much the same situation with the Kerner Commission; he had merely punted the difficult decision, but the problem was the same. He was faced with the decision to agree with the commission and be seen to reward rioters or reject the commission and be accused of acting too aggressively in the cities. The bleak circumstances with which Johnson found himself only accentuated his feelings of resignation and indecisiveness. He felt he was unable to make a correct decision; he was stuck.

In confiding to Kearns about his situation, Johnson complained: "I was being forced over the edge by rioting blacks, demonstrating students, marching welfare mothers, squawking professors, and hysterical reporters. And then the final straw. The thing I feared from the first day of my Presidency was actually coming true. Robert Kennedy had openly announced his intention to reclaim

[341] Peden, interview transcript. National Archives and Records Administration.
[342] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream,* re. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991; New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 347. Citations refer to the St. Martin's Griffin edition.

the throne in the memory of his brother. And the American people, swayed by the magic of the name, were dancing in the streets. The whole situation was unbearable for me. After thirty-seven years of public service, I deserved something more than being left alone in the middle of the plain, chased by stampedes on every side."[343] At this stage, Johnson's mind and focus were on all these "stampedes" the commission was just another that caused him to surrender. This was a further choice which had no positive outcomes for him.

Johnson's decision not to seek re-election in 1968 was another factor that limited any potential positive impacts of the Kerner Commission. His choice could also have proven a factor as to why he ignored the report. Although it is not entirely clear when Johnson decided not to run, the commission was published only weeks before he made his decision public. In stepping down, Johnson made himself a lame duck. Vietnam is often the reason that is most cited as being behind his withdrawal.[344] Johnson knew that any president's most effective time was at the beginning of their term. Toward the end of his time in office, as the commission worked behind the scenes, Johnson had contemplated an exit. Clifford recalled that in the latter half of 1967, Johnson had considered not running in 1968 on a flight back from South East Asia, which Clifford dismissed at the time as it had been "at the end of a hard day."[345] From Clifford's recollections, these interactions are evidence of Johnson's tendency to pity himself; he wanted someone to flatter him.[346] Clifford reminisced how Johnson would say he would soon leave office on one day and be ready and willing to fight the next day, meaning the 31st March 1968 announcement he was not running proved such a shock.[347]

[343] Lyndon B. Johnson to Doris Kearns Goodwin in Doris Keans Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream,* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991; New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 343. Citations refer to the St. Martin's Griffin edition.
[344] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 529.
[345] Clifford, interview 4 transcript, 7th August 1969, LBJ Library Oral Histories.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Ibid.

If Johnson's departure from the race was a final gambit to try and get measured peace in Vietnam, it came with the final sacrifice of his domestic agenda. Johnson had hoped that in guaranteeing that he would not be making decisions for political reasons, he gained the ability to present himself to Hanoi as an honest broker. However, doing so doomed a push for the widescale legislation the commission wanted, as Clifford admitted, "He has lost his major leverage."[348] In addition, Clifford cited Johnson's inability to secure Fortas' appointment as Chief Justice as evidence of his depleted domestic power.[349] After years of having to make the most demanding decisions, Johnson could not go on anymore, especially when he could no longer make domestic policy decisions that appealed to him.

Conclusion

Lyndon Johnson's behaviour was a significant reason the commission was cast aside. His involvement in Vietnam, his push for war in Southeast Asia, and a war on poverty ultimately proved too much for his country, his party, and himself. He wallowed in self-pity and despair, unable to control his ego and sense of victimhood. It was a pity that Lyndon Johnson never took a firmer stance and supported the Kerner Commission. He will undoubtedly, deservedly, go down in history as a staunch defender and champion of civil rights. Still, the Kerner Commission should have been the base of another effort with which he could "continue", as he had vowed five days after President Kennedy was assassinated.[350]

Robert McNamara summarised his view of Johnson in his autobiography, as he explained what he wanted to be able to say in his farewell address as he left the Pentagon. He described Johnson as "the most complex individual I have ever known."[351] He continued, "Many in this room

[348] Ibid.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Lyndon B. Johnson, "November 27, 1963: Address to Joint Session of Congress," transcript of speech delivered at Washington, D.C. 27th November 1963. November 27, 1963: Address to Joint Session of Congress | Miller Center. Accessed 16th July 2023.
[351] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam,* 317.

believe Lyndon Johnson is crude, mean, vindictive, scheming, untruthful."[352] Despite his thoughts, McNamara believed history would be kind to Johnson and give favourable judgements to the Great Society, civil rights legislation, and policies that aided the poorest in society.[353] McNamara ended his thoughts solemnly, "But for Vietnam, a war which he inherited – and which neither he nor we managed wisely – we would have been much further along in solving these problems."[354] McNamara's views of Johnson help understand the president's fragile ego. His presidency was full of contradictions, and the Kerner Commission was one of them. The commission was a fatality of Johnson's capricious mind and tragic situation.

The great irony of Johnson's involvement with the Kerner Commission was that, had he felt able to embrace it, he may well have continued his mission to transform American society. Whitney Young acknowledged this in an oral history account: "I think he saw the Great Society as a monument. In a way it would be going a step beyond what his great hero Franklin Roosevelt did. I've always felt that if it hadn't been for the Viet Nam war – which is one of the ironical bits of fate – that Mr. Johnson would have made America the Great Society."[355] Johnson's failure to fully embrace the Kerner Commission is significant evidence of his presidency descending into a tragedy.

Lyndon Johnson was a tragic figure. Historians agree with this assessment. Robert Dallek believed Johnson was "a man notable for his successes and failures, for his triumphs and tragedy."[356] Fredrik Logevall said of the Johnson presidency: "It bears all the characteristics of a tragedy."[357] Despite his numerous qualities, the 36th president possessed personality traits that meant accepting criticism and seeing solutions outside his typical viewpoint was difficult. His background and

[352] Ibid., 317.
[353] Ibid., 317.
[354] Ibid., 317.
[355] Young, 18th June 1969, interview 1 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.
[356] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 628.
[357] Fredrik Logevall, ""It's Always Hard to Cut Losses": The Politics of Escalation in Vietnam." in *LBJ'S America: The Life and Legacies of Lyndon Baines Johnson,* eds.Mark Atwood Lawrence and Mark K. Updegrove, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024), 253.

formative years in the Texas Hill Country left him with a fear of failure and an innate ability to be affected by it.[358] His administration went from extreme triumph to depressing lows, leading Bernstein to ponder whether Johnson's time as president was "perhaps the most tragic in the history of that great office."[359]

Johnson's grievances against the commission and its members meant the easy decision for him was to cast it aside as he sought to control the now skyrocketing costs of the Vietnam War. The decision displeased liberals; for the duration of his presidency, Johnson and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party made for an uneasy partnership. Ever the pragmatist, Johnson believed that the capacity for a new expansive agenda was dead. In public, he blamed Congress, whilst privately, his focus had been fully turned to Southeast Asia. As he signed the 1968 Civil Rights Act and promised fair housing for all Americans, putting into law one of the Kerner Report's suggestions, Johnson lamented, "This bill has had a long and stormy trip. We did not get it in 1966. We pleaded for it again in 1967. But the Congress took no action that year."[360] Therefore, faced with a poor political climate and a president who willingly conceded defeat, the commission's hopes of any further, lasting immortalisation were gone.

In doing nothing at first, Johnson as good as openly criticised the commission. He left it in the wilderness with no defence. His inaction gave the report's congressional supporters nothing to work with and no support for building a legislative platform. He left the Democratic Party searching for a new leader on domestic issues. The reality was that the report was not a product of its time. Neither was Lyndon Johnson; the man he was a few years earlier was gone as he struggled to be the president in the late 1960s. He believed he no longer had any sway over Congress or the people he was president of, and he even took the step of withdrawing from the presidential race to restore

[358] Caro, *The Passage of Power,* 204.
[359] Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson,* 529
[360] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks on Signing the Civil Rights Act," transcript of speech delivered at Washington, D.C. 11th April 1968. April 11, 1968: Remarks on Signing the Civil Rights Act | Miller Center. Accessed 18th June 2023.

some credibility and bargaining power. In hindsight, as Gillon deduced, the president might have supported the report had it been released in 1964 or 1965.[361] However, it is impossible to ignore Johnson had to take responsibility for the commission's recommendations not being taken further. With additional hindsight, the unique mix of a president out of time, money, and power combined with LBJ's complicated personality was the reason for his initial delay in accepting the findings.

The conclusion that Lyndon Johnson's failings contributed to his delays in acknowledging the Kerner Report does not diminish the fact that he did more than any president as of that time, and a good deal many since, to eradicate the inequalities his hated report spoke of. Likewise, Johnson was remorseful that he did not do more and was still proud of his work to press civil rights forward.

Chapter 2: Why did Lyndon B. Johnson not Initially Welcome the Kerner Commission? Backlash

Johnson faced many external pressures in the early spring of 1968. The emergence of a resurgent conservative movement was the most immediate threat to his presidency. Therefore, for this thesis to conclude why Johnson did not initially welcome the findings of the Kerner Commission, the significance of the reaction of those conservatives around the United States and their allies in Congress to the report is vital. The president was also under pressure from liberals. Left-wing members of Congress expressed support for the commission's work. Thus, this chapter considers how his political opponents on the right and left influenced Johnson's decision.

From its inception, the Kerner Commission faced backlash from the right and left. Reactionary attitudes formed much of the public discourse concerning the commission. The backlash stemmed most notably from the report's divisive conclusion. Thus, it contributed to deterring Johnson from pursuing and promoting the final report's findings. The hostile response to the report highlighted a common theme in the late 1960s United States: a lack of political will to make further

[361] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*, xiii.

changes to the conditions in the cities. Additional steps were needed towards full equality, away from the divided societies the commission spoke about. The commission's champions argued that this political will should have been there and often lamented that it was not. Conversely, from the right, a platform of racist rejection started to develop. Those whom the report asked to do more shrugged or guffawed at the commission's recommendations. Congressional hearings highlighted all of these internal battles, and the rejection of the public was critical in understanding how the commission failed to convince the president to embrace the report.

Following the 1966 mid-term elections, the number of conservatives in Congress increased, which made it harder for Johnson to enact his domestic agenda. Furthermore, the Kerner Commission failed to make the cities an American problem as opposed to a black-versus-white problem, creating an opening for these reactionaries. In his summary for the 2016 re-print of the commission, Julian Zelizer believed the success of conservative efforts to rebut Johnson was central to its failure, "Because the conservative countermobilization to the Great Society was well under way by 1968, the report never became much of a guide toward public policy."[362] However, the commission successfully highlighted the conditions in American urban centres to an unaware American public.

When analysing the commission's inability to change hearts and minds among a reluctant white populace, it is evident that their views on the riots and race determined how they would view the report. In addition, the riots can be classified as "the symptoms not the disease."[363] The designation of the riots as a "symptom" was a problem the commission was ill-equipped to resolve.[364] For reactionaries, the riots and violence were the problem, not the inherent issues. A significant white majority reinforced these conditions and maintained a status quo that marginalised

[362] Zelizer, "Introduction to the 2016 Edition," in The Kerner Report, *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,* xxxv.
[363] Chester, Hodgson and Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968*, 40.
[364] Ibid., 40.

black Americans. Those who sought the continuation of normality had no interest in treating the underlying "disease."[365]

Racism was perceived to be a noticeable and unchangeable feature of life. Even if the Kerner Commission had inspired Johnson into action or had enlightened Congress about the desperate position of many impoverished ghetto inhabitants, it could not resolve the institutional problem. No legislative victory could be won to defeat *de facto* segregation. The commission called for a change to this aspect of American life.

The rejection from the right came in many forms. Many fiscal conservatives, albeit sympathetic to the plight of the ghetto dwellers, were not satisfied with providing additional money for social programmes, especially when combined with increased spending on the Vietnam War. The budgetary control form of backlash can be attributed to any politician who did not want to be seen to support the commission's proposals, especially in a decisive election year where it was vital to win middle-class suburban votes. Appealing to the middle-class was especially critical to the candidates who sought to win state-wide office. Furthermore, some Republicans attacked the Kerner Commission to gain ground with traditionally Democratic, white, Southern voters. Finally, some people were, as the commission warned, outright racist. They rejected the commission, stereotyped those who lived in the ghettos, and engaged with the right-wing candidates' dog whistles under the mantras of "state's rights" and "law and order". Whatever the reasons for the hostile response, the Kerner Commission has to be seen in the broader context of the culture war that has raged ever since the 1960s. The commission had to accept that some did not want to hear their message and did not want to heed its meaning.

Critically, the commission met resistance from one place it had hoped not to: its primary audience, the white middle-class. It was this audience whose support had been essential for the civil rights successes earlier in Johnson's time in office; however, after the passage of the Voting Rights

[365] Ibid., 40.

Act in 1965, many had grown tired of the quest for greater equality. Geographical shifts and civil unrest alarmed the white middle-class suburbanite. Prior to the summer of 1965, civil rights battles were fought in Montgomery and Selma – they were now on the streets of Newark and Detroit. Furthermore, the promised fair housing meant equal access to the almost exclusively white suburbs of large Northern and Western cities. The threat of black homeowners becoming their neighbours spread fear amongst suburbanites, who worried about a fall in house prices and racial integration. It was this fear that reactionary politicians seized upon to help drown out the commission.

Furthermore, the reasons for the backlash from America's conservatives are critical in understanding why the report was not the wake-up call for American society the commissioners hoped it would be. The resulting criticism the commission received and the problematic place it put Johnson in are reasons why the commission failed. However, the problem was multi-layered. The retaliation the commission received did not only come from the traditional racists; it also came from members of the white middle-class and those who might have had sympathy with the report but baulked its expensive price tags.

White Backlash: There is no law that can make me like anyone I don't want to

If it were ever to have been a success, the Kerner Commission depended heavily upon the support of the white middle-class, as these Americans were the largest voting demographic. Johnson also relied on these people for his political survival. Thus, his consideration of this demographic contributed to his reaction to the Kerner Commission. A political base of ethnic minorities and elite New-Frontier disciples was insufficient to build a governable consensus or a successful electoral bloc. The commission needed the many voices of the New Deal coalition to support the final report's recommendations. However, due to conflicts over racial integration and the Vietnam War, the Democratic administration lost support. Tied to the president, the commission suffered the same fate. Consequently, white rejection spelt doom to the report's grand spending plans. As political commentators Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg observed: "The great majority of the voters in

America are unyoung, unpoor, and unblack; they are middle-aged, middle-class, middle minded."[366] When Scammon and Wattenberg analysed the electorate in the 1968 election, they found the average age of the voting public in that year was forty-seven.[367] Therefore, it made political sense for the Kerner Commission to target a middle-class audience; if the commission had convinced them to change their minds on ghetto poverty, they would have made it more politically feasible for Johnson to accept the report's suggestions openly. Harris knew these were the people whose minds needed to be widened on the causes of the riots. He felt the facts had not been adequately or fairly outlined, and the public required education on the issue. In an oral history interview, he recalled, "I was convinced that the people didn't understand the causes and, therefore, didn't understand really what had to be done."[368] Having a reluctant target audience was one of many issues the commission faced.

Press response further fuelled white middle-class reticence. When the public read and digested the final report, white Americans surveyed rejected the idea that racism was to blame for the riots by 53% to 35%.[369] When the question of whether they supported new taxes to pay for the report's recommendations was raised, 63% to 23% rejected that idea.[370] The one-sided nature of these polls demonstrated the fear and reluctance of those surveyed. In addition, the responses suggested that the Kerner Commission and those associated with it were in political peril.

When the report was leaked to the press in late February 1968, the reaction was explosive and divisive, with a headline in *The New York Times* announcing: "Johnson Unit Censures Whites."[371] After the final report's publication, *The New York Times* again ran with a report on its front page with

[366] Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority,* (New York, N.Y., Coward-McCann, Inc: 1970), 21.
[367] Ibid.,21.
[368] Harris, RFKOH-FRH-01 Fred R. Harris Oral History Interview – RFK#1
[369] Zelizer, "Introduction to the 2016 Edition," in The Kerner Report, *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,* xxxiv.
[370] Ibid., xxxiv.
[371] Special to the New York Times, "Johnson Unit Assails Whites in Negro Riots," *New York Times,* 25th February 1968, 1. TimesMachine: February 25, 1968 - NYTimes.com. Accessed 18th June 2023.

subheadings that stated "Whites criticized" and "Vast aid to negroes urged, with new taxes if needed."[372] These headlines reflected the view of many white Americans: they did not wish to be blamed for the unrest. Many were not outwardly racist, so they were less than enthused to be dealt the blame. Thus, the press reaction did little to dampen their anxieties, especially when the Kerner Commission suggested that those who paid the most in taxes would have to pay more under their plans.[373] Even though the commission generated a certain amount of fury in public, the reaction disappeared after a few weeks. However, Congress still debated the subject and discussed employment training programmes the commission supported. In the public view, the report largely vanished with the news of Johnson's withdrawal from the 1968 presidential election on the 31st March 1968 and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination on the 4th April 1968. The report's disappearance from the public consciousness demonstrated that public reaction, however fervent, tracked the news cycle.

Conversely, the report's lasting political legacy was that it helped entrench themes that would become a central part of the electoral narrative ahead of the elections of 1968. It did receive a reaction, although the commissioners were not pleased with it. For example, the public engaged with the published report, as Harris wished; it was a bestseller when it was released. However, the type of engagement with the commission soon demonstrated that the report's determination that white racism was to blame for the ills that affected the ghettos was a self-fulfilling prediction.

After the report was published, the commissioners and Johnson received many letters that demonstrated the racism and divided societies the commission spoke of were omnipresent in the white voters they attempted to appeal to. The letters featured such vitriolic racism that Johnson and the commission members could have been forgiven for thinking that no progress had been made on

[372] John Herbers, "Panel Calls for Drastic Action to Avoid 2-Society Nation", *New York Times*, 1st March 1968, 1. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1968/03/01/76931174.html?pageNumber=1. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[373] Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, 240.

civil rights. Kerner himself described the letters as "filthy and foul."[374] A woman from Hollywood, CA, wrote, "The rioters made the ghettos so let them clean themselves up, and earn the respect of the white people."[375] She went on, "There is no law that can make me like anyone that I don't want to."[376] In another letter, a man from Hyattsville, MD, named William Werber, wrote to Governor Kerner: "The White man can't hold a candle to the black man when it comes to Racism."[377] Werber highlighted examples of white people being killed in Africa and concluded, "What prompts the N.A.A.C.P., Core, S.N.C.C. and S.C.L.C to spew out threats against all white institutions and keep the hate pot boiling? Racism?"[378] He continued, asking, "How could any group of intelligent and reasonable men feel that taxing productive people to maintain unproductive people in a perpetual state of indolence will solve any problem?"[379] Another letter writer went even further and suggested that black leaders did not want to see the end of riots and that they were going to continue a push for further militancy, saying, "a shift has occurred in the concerns and the slogans of the Negro leaders: they are moving toward militant separate Black Society and away from Integration."[380]

[374] Otto Kerner, interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, 12th June 1969, Chicago, Il, interview 1 transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/oh-kernero-19690612-1-90-15. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[375] Jeanette Johnson to all members of National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, letter, "Reaction to final report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1, 1968- June 13, 1968," 4th March 1968, Folder: 001346-014-0163, Letters Received After Publication of Final Report, Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-014-0163&accountid=7408. Accessed 13th June 2023.
[376] Ibid.
[377] William W. Werber to Otto Kerner, letter, "Reaction to final report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1, 1968- June 13, 1968," 26th February 1968, Folder: 001346-014-0163, Letters Received After Publication of Final Report, Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-014-0163&accountid=7408. Accessed 13th June 2023.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.
[380] Haven Page to Otto Kerner, letter, "Reaction to final report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1, 1968- June 13, 1968," 27th February, 1968, Folder: 001346-014-0163, Letters Received After Publication of Final Report, Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-014-0163&accountid=7408. Accessed 13th June 2023.

The letters continued in the weeks after the publication. One sent to Congressman Speedy Long (D-LA) continued with a similar tone as those that had come a fortnight earlier. As a segregationist, Long was open to receiving such communications. The letter from Edward D. Biter and Mary B. Biter called on Long to "kill all pending Civil Rights and Open (Forced) Housing bills."[381] The letter originated from Fort Lauderdale, FL.[382] It was clear the authors wanted to write to a particular politician who was opposed to civil rights and the Kerner Commission, as they wrote, "The President's Riot Commission Report is nothing but an open invitation to more demands and rioting, with the rioters knowing full well they will not be prosecuted."[383] The themes present in the letters appear consistently in white resistance to the commission. These letters demonstrate the sheer extent of racism and fear that the Kerner Commission and the Johnson administration were up against. The commission's summary had told truths to people who were not willing or prepared to hear them.

Further examples of racism were less conspicuous and reflected the general state of affairs in 1967 and 1968.. However successful and significant Johnson's civil rights legislative achievements were at removing the legal barriers that reinforced segregation, they did not eliminate prejudice and fear. The letters the commission received served as a reminder that such ingrained hatred would be a complex problem to solve. The fear had permeated American society, regardless of the passage of civil rights legislation earlier in Johnson's presidency. For example, just three years before the establishment of the Kerner Commission, 54% of respondents to a 1964 *New York Times* survey taken after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 thought the push for civil rights was moving

[381] Edward D. Biter and Mary B. Biter to Speedy Long, Letter, "Great Society poverty program files, including New York City welfare families," 12th March 1968, Folder: 101106-016-0416, WE 9 Poverty Program (The Great Society), War on Poverty, 1964-1968, Part 5: White House Central Files, Welfare and the Poverty Program Subject Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=101106-016-0416&accountid=7408t. Accessed 13th June 2023.
[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid.

too fast.[384] In addition, the corresponding article and survey highlighted the discomfort many New Yorkers felt when they considered the prospect of more desegregated housing: 40% of respondents felt uncomfortable about having a number of black families living near them, 18% said they would feel uncomfortable if there were one or two black families, and 66% said it would bother them if they were the only white person that lived on a block made up of black American families.[385]

However, the survey also asked questions about voting intentions before the 1964 election, which showed that 61% said they would vote for Johnson in November, against 18% for the Republican nominee Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ).[386] Of those who said they would vote for Johnson, the number was slightly up on those who said they voted for Kennedy in 1960, which was 57% of the 199 respondents.[387] The article's author, Fred Powledge, deduced that, while white hostility existed, it was not changing voting patterns.[388] Powledge was proved correct as Johnson charged to a dominant election victory, with further gains up and down the country for his Democrats. Johnson's triumph saw him secure the largest popular vote percentage of any president in the 20th century. The incumbent president also performed well in the suburbs, as white backlash "failed to materialize in most parts of the North."[389] Crucially, in 1964, the nation's number one issue, according to Gallup polling, was "international problems."[390] By 1968, this had changed, and the Kerner Report was central to a shift towards domestic concerns.

In 1968, the nation's most significant concerns were now social issues. For those Americans who held these worries, the Kerner Report emboldened the same crime and lawlessness they feared most. They were complicit in allowing the nation to remain as divided as it was. In February 1968, as

[384] Fred Powledge, "Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive," *New York Times*, 21st September, 1964, 1.TimesMachine: September 21, 1964 - NYTimes.com. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[385] Ibid.
[386] Ibid.
[387] Ibid.
[388] Ibid.
[389] Anthony Lewis, "White Backlash Doesn't Develop," *New York Times*, 4th November 1964. TimesMachine: November 4, 1964 - NYTimes.com.
[390] Scammon and Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, 37-38.

the Commission wrapped up its work, two days before the final report was officially issued, *The New York Times* reported that Gallup polling found "crime and lawlessness are viewed by the public as the top domestic problem facing the nation for the first time since the beginning of scientific polling in the mid-thirties."[391] Consequently, this increased the political pressure on the Democrat incumbent and divided the Democratic Party ahead of the 1968 elections as the public got ready to vote on these concerns. When they looked at the same Gallup polls and applied them to the election of 1968, Scammon and Wattenberg concluded that this polling evidenced voting pattern change as Americans began to align themselves "along the axes of certain social situations."[392] The Republican Party seized upon this shift and competed for middle-ground voters, or those whom author Rick Perlstein referred to as "fed-up-niks."[393] It was these people whose political power decided the 1968 election, and they were less likely to support the commission.

The riots themselves were the fears of the white middle-classes turned into reality. Harry McPherson, who served Johnson as Director of Speechwriting and as White House Counsel, offered testimony that supported the reactions of these people. His assessment closely matched the findings of *The New York Times* poll from 1964 and the studies of Scammon and Wattenberg. McPherson believed that middle-class whites desired a segregated society, "they're middle-class whites; they don't want to live around them; they don't want to go to school with them; they don't want anything."[394] McPherson attributes the commission's failure to the breakdown of the existing New Deal coalition.[395] The commission challenged the very foundations and structure of the fragile electoral grouping. McPherson himself stated that the coalition was "held together sort of

[391] Special to the New York Times, "Poll finds crime top fear at home," *New York Times,* 28th February 1968, 29. TimesMachine: February 28, 1968 - NYTimes.com. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[392] Scammon and Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, 21.
[393] Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, 232.
[394] Harry McPherson, interview by T. Harri Baker, 24th March 1969, Washington D.C., interview IV, transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Oral history transcript, Harry C. McPherson, interview 4 (IV), 3/24/1969, by T.H. Baker · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 18th June 2023.
[395] Ibid.

loosely."[396] The summer riots broke these unstable links, and the commission made it clear how irreparable these connections were.

The Johnson administration struggled with its response to the riots, keen to defend itself against the criticism from the right and left, but faced with the reality that, "The riots come along and scare the be-Jesus out of a lot of members of this coalition."[397] As McPherson went on to state, the administration, of which he was a crucial part in curating speeches concerning the riots, and the commission struck what he believed was the wrong tone as it postulated that unrest would carry on until a serious effort was made to tackle living conditions in urban centres.[398] According to McPherson, the display of such empathy had alienated the white middle-classes, "This telegraphed to the other members of the coalition that nobody really gave a damn about their concern – that the city was going to be burned down; that you couldn't walk in it at night anymore, and all the rest."[399] The Johnson administration had previously been able to count on the coalition as social concerns often came second. Many had felt sympathy for black Americans living under Southern repression, but that number had waned.

By 1968, liberalism had caused fatigue in the country. Conservatives had seized the momentum, and the era of New Deal politics came to an end. The Kerner Commission was one of the most significant casualties of this fatigue and new momentum. The commission represented further liberal spending on a group of people that was not the middle-classes. Inflation also started to have an impact. Consequently, Americans were less worried about helping those in poverty or the declining cities. As a result, middle America was looking for solutions for themselves. Johnson's spending, which the 89th Congress enabled, began to be viewed with greater disdain. The lack of desire for liberalism and government handouts was seen as what libertarian historian H.W. Brands

[396] Ibid.
[397] Ibid
[398] Ibid.
[399] Ibid.

termed as anger with "bleeding-heart liberalism."[400] The Kerner Commission's final report was the literal representation of "bleeding-heart liberalism," a recommendation that more needed to be done to help the most vulnerable in society, even after years of spending under the Great Society.[401] The public belief in massive federal outlay and big government to solve the nation's problems waned. In addition, the press response to the report played on these themes. The white majority was complicit in this re-characterisation of the civil rights movement. There remained "little reason to believe the white majority was ready in practice to abandon the half-conscious assumption of white supremacy."[402]

A whole section of society felt aggrieved at being blamed for the riots. The commission contributed to the impression that the Johnson administration concentrated on helping black Americans and disregarded those who had not rioted. These people sought a new political home. In an oral history account, McPherson acknowledged that they would have thought, "We'll go find ourselves a guy like George Wallace or Richard Nixon. At any rate, we'll vote this crowd out of office. They don't care about us any more."[403] In McPherson's view, the commission had made the situation more explosive due to the blame being laid at the feet of white people, "now they've indicted us, which is even worse."[404] Ultimately, the reactions of white Americans laid the way for a different kind of politician, one whom they felt would not abandon them, a decision which undermined any prospects for the commission's suggestions. Nixon and Wallace accepted their support.

Apathetic Americans caused irreparable damage to the commission's ability to be a historical catalyst in the quest for advanced anti-poverty programmes. In an ironic twist, the backlash the commission received proved that its warning of the United States fracturing into two separate societies was correct. Crucially, the lack of will undermined the commission's legacy,

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[400] H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York: Anchor, 2016), 143.
[401] Ibid.
[402] Chester, Hodgson and Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968*, 39.
[403] Harry McPherson, interview IV, transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.
[404] Ibid.

condemning the report to a footnote in the traditional accounts of the liberal and civil rights movements. In a memo to the commission's director David Ginsburg, Jack Rosenthal (a liberal speechwriter who worked for Robert Kennedy, among others) observed, "We know what to do about assimilation of the Negro. We do not have the national political will to act on our knowledge."[405] He believed that if funds were freed up by the hypothetical ending of the Vietnam conflict, a real risk remained that this "will" would still not exist.[406] Rosenthal implied the money could be assigned to a shopping mall project, high-speed trains, or new middle-income housing instead.[407] Senator Howard Cannon (D-NV) shared these concerns, "Money and programs, in my view, are secondary to the far more urgent need to demonstrate in open and clear fashion that Americans have the will to meet these problems."[408] Addressing the lack of desire amongst the people was crucial for the commissioners, who spoke about needing the people's will to exert decisive action. Harris remarked, "First, more than legislation or money, the American people need to assert their will and determination to solve these problems."[409] Unfortunately for the commission, this will was not there. Americans were more concerned about crime, lawlessness, and the war in Vietnam than they were about civil rights. Ultimately, the commission did not have support and was met with hostility from the public, ambivalence from Congress, and a lack of support from the president.

Many white middle-class members who lived in the suburbs of the nation's largest cities were content with the quest for further rights being far away, in the South, where images of police brutality in Alabama and Mississippi had previously affected their consciousness. However, they

[405] Jack Rosenthal, memorandum, Jack Rosenthal memo on Kerner Commission final report, 12th January 1968, Folder: 001346-018-0769, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-018-0769&accountid=7408. Accessed 13th June 2023.
[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid.
[408] Howard Cannon, "U.S. Congressional Record Senate," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4956.
[409] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 125.

were less receptive as the battle moved North and West. As the push for civil rights evolved, *de jure* segregation gave way and produced *de facto* segregation. Consequently, equality before the law did not result in economic or social equality, especially for those black Americans who still resided in the Deep South or had migrated to the inner cities of the North and West. The images on television screens of the long, hot summer of 1967 were of rioters where years of bigotry and injustice caused the oppressed to strike back. These riots were far from the peaceful protests, sit-ins, boycotts, and marches that defined the civil rights movement in the early half of the decade. Subsequently, the sympathies of those who could have been relied upon in the past to draw upon the better angels of their nature had eroded. The plight of black Americans was, at best, not understood or flatly ignored and, in the worst cases, actively encouraged. It is worth repeating what the Kerner Commission stated: "What white Americans can never forget - is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it and white society condones it."[410] Many would ignore this warning, but it became a call to arms for conservative politicians.

Conservative Backlash: Law and Order

The social concerns of the middle-class were peripheral to Johnson's landslide victory in 1964; they were, however, central to the 1968 election due to an evolving political landscape. John Andrew III believed, "By 1968 the urban crisis was without question the central social issue in the United States."[411] Seeking to find their place in this changing world was a Republican Party that had been driven to make significant adjustments to become electable again. In 1964, Johnson and the Democrats had thoroughly defeated the Republicans. For a revamped Grand Old Party (G.O.P.), "law and order" became a far more popular political message than the extremism that the 1964 nominee Barry Goldwater delivered. Goldwater had rejected traditional politics and spoke of using nuclear weapons as a means of defence, which horrified voters. For instance, in his 1964 convention

[410] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 2.
[411] John A. Andrew III, *Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society* (Chicago, IL, Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 151.

acceptance speech, Goldwater famously declared, "I would remind you that extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice."[412] Voters were terrified of the language surrounding Goldwater, and the Johnson campaign seized its chance.

The campaign's most significant attack was the "Daisy" advert. Johnson's campaign team aired the advert only once; however, its impact was significant. After a child counts, pulling the petals off of a daisy, the counting switches to a military voiceover, and when the countdown hits zero, a nuclear bomb detonates.[413] Johnson's voice then announces, "These are the stakes. To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or go into the dark. We must either love each other or die."[414] The advert dramatically concluded with another voice-over that told the viewer to: "Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd. The stakes are too high for you to stay home."[415] Without even mentioning Goldwater by name, the advert succeeded in portraying him as a dangerous man beset on the use of nuclear weapons. To a certain extent, this was based on fact; Goldwater had endorsed local commanders to make decisions to use atomic weapons.[416] The furore about the 'Daisy ad' drowned out Goldwater's own attacks on crime and unrest.[417]

However, in 1968, Americans faced a new perceived threat: the safety of their streets. The socially conservative hardline Goldwater had preached in 1964 now resonated with many Americans in 1968. For example, in his 1964 convention acceptance speech, Goldwater proclaimed to those assembled, "The growing menace in our country tonight, to personal safety, to life to limb and property, in homes, in churches, on the playgrounds, and places of business, particularly in our great

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[412] Barry Goldwater, "Goldwater's 1964 Acceptance Speech," transcript of speech delivered to the Republican National Convention at San Francisco, CA., 16th July 1964, Washingtonpost.com: Goldwater Speech. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[413] *Daisy Ad (LBJ 1964 Presidential campaign commercial)*, The LBJ Library, 1964, video file posted 14th May 2012, Daisy Ad (LBJ 1964 Presidential campaign commercial) - YouTube. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[414] Ibid.
[415] Ibid.
[416] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, 131-132.
[417] Elaine Tyler May, "Security against Democracy: The Legacy of the Cold War at Home," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 945-946. Security against Democracy: The Legacy of the Cold War at Home on JSTOR. Accessed on 3rd February 2023.

cities, is the mounting concern, or should be, of every thoughtful citizen in the United States."[418] Such statements in Goldwater's 1964 speech could quite easily have been given by one of the aspiring conservative Republican hopefuls in 1968. The Republican candidate Richard Nixon and the extreme third-party candidate George Wallace made crime and "law and order" issues front and centre in their campaigns. The decision to prioritise "law and order" revealed that concerns over the cities became widespread. It cannot be overstated that in 1968, this issue was relevant to millions of Americans.[419] In this environment, a liberal manifesto such as the Kerner Commission felt out of place and out of a different era. A core reason for the commission's failure was that it called for something that was not favoured amongst a large enough percentage of the population and did not fit the political landscape. It is another example of where the Kerner Report prophesied its failure as it noted the need for popular support. The same popular support was moving away from liberalism.

The rise of Wallace as a national political figure further highlighted the problematic landscape that greeted the Kerner Report. His ascension to countrywide politics is an example of the cautionary tale of separate societies that the Kerner Commission warned of; it also further complicated the case for the commission's proposed solutions. In an appearance on the CBS show *Face the Nation,* Wallace trumpeted his ability to lead a grassroots political movement and attributed crowd size to broader enthusiasm for the backlash crusade.[420] He told his interviewers: "We are having the largest crowds, we're having tumultuous support for our attitudes, and philosophy throughout the country."[421] Throughout his interview, Wallace maintained, "I am speaking for millions of people in our country."[422] He undoubtedly spoke for people who were not fond of the commission, such as those who wrote the letters to Johnson and Kerner. They would

[418] Goldwater, "Goldwater's 1964 Acceptance Speech."
[419] Scammon and Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, 37.
[420] George Wallace, Interview with Martin Agronsky, Nelson Benton and Joseph Kraft, *Face the Nation*, CBS, 21st July 1968, [Face the Nation] with George Wallace | C-SPAN.org. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[421] Ibid.
[422] Ibid.

have been quite happy if the commission's warning was correct and the United States did split into two societies.

Wallace's support demonstrated his appeal was no longer regional. In 1968, he had a broader support base that consisted of the "silent majority", a phrase often used to capture the views of the disaffected white voter, the type of voter that Nixon, and later the 45th President Donald Trump, successfully lured. An example of his ability to capture the mood of the disaffected was also seen in the *Face the Nation* interview. The journalist Joseph Kraft asked Wallace, "Is it right or is it wrong that what followed after 64 or 65 were civil rights laws?" Wallace replied, "Well, every time someone wants a law passed they go out and do something."[423] Conservatives were thus keen to further their cause and pushed "to turn every bill into a riot bill."[424] In his interview, Wallace tied civil rights action to civil unrest but ignored how justifiable such actions were.[425] Furthermore, he spoke optimistically about his chances of winning states outside the South.[426]

Although he almost certainly hyperbolised his chances in the election, the fact that Wallace could boast about targeting states all over the union was a testament to the depth of the backlash movement.[427] What was not hyperbolic were strong showings in the 1964 Democratic primaries in Maryland and Wisconsin and his nearly ten million votes in the 1968 presidential contest.[428] From 1964 to 1968, many Northerners had gone from being "receptive" to the message of Wallace to "enthusiastic."[429] The fact that over the mid to late 1960s, George Wallace, a regional segregationist, rose in political influence and won states in the 1968 election showed that a backlash movement was present and thrived in many unexpected places.

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[423] Ibid.
[424] "Putting First Things First", *New York Times,* August 21, 1967, TimesMachine: August 21, 1967 - NYTimes.com. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[425] George Wallace, *Face the Nation*, CBS, 21st July 1968.
[426] Ibid.
[427] Ibid.
[428] Gould, "Never a Deep Partisan: Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party, 1963-1969", 26.
[429] David S. Broder, "Election of 1968," In *History of American Presidential Elections*, vol. 9, *History of American Presidential Elections 1960-1968,* ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., 3705-3865, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 3716.

Katherine Peden's electoral defeat was a significant example of the effect of Wallace in individual states. The official count from the House of Representatives Clerk contradicted the numbers and facts Peden and oral history interviewer Joe B. Franz presented, but the observed trends remain. Peden reflected that "Wallace, probably, was the cause of my defeat."[430] Peden received 51,419 more votes than Humphrey despite 113,028 more votes being cast in the presidential than in the senatorial election.[431] Nixon won Kentucky by 64,870 votes, whereas Peden lost by 35,300 votes.[432] The American Independent nominee for Senate in Kentucky received negligible votes (1.02% of the total vote).[433] Notably, Peden does not even mention that there was a candidate from the American Independent Party in her interview.[434] Peden observed how Wallace won her home county as she also won it and lamented that "dissident Democratics" did not vote for both her and Wallace.[435] Peden's defeat is evidence that Americans voted on the social issues that Wallace championed. Furthermore, it shows that traditional Democratic voters abandoned the party and split the New Deal coalition over these social issues.

Electoral evidence of the Republican Party embracing the same message as Wallace and its appeal to voters can be found in Florida. In 1968, a Republican senator, Edward Gurney, was elected in the state for the first time since Reconstruction. What was most remarkable about Gurney's election success were his victories in counties in the Florida panhandle that voted for Wallace at the presidential level. Although the complete Republican takeover of the South would take a few more years, Gurney's success in the panhandle counties and his election to the Senate was a clear bellwether. Wallace was seen as a segregationist, so his appeal to these voters can be attributed to his views on race. Therefore, rejecting racial integration was a key reason for their votes. Although the Florida panhandle was not considered an area the Kerner commissioners would have catered

[430] Peden, interview transcript. National Archives and Records Administration.
[431] *History, Art &Archives, U.S. House of Representatives,* "Election Statistics: 1920-Present," https://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/. Accessed 24th May 2023.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Ibid.
[434] Peden, interview transcript. National Archives and Records Administration.
[435] Ibid.

their arguments toward, it showed a burgeoning relationship between those who cried out for state's rights and those opposed to the commission on the basis that it helped those who rioted, rather than those who did not.

Gurney's triumph demonstrated the success of "law and order" and racial dog whistles. In addition, it indicated how middle-class America allied with the Deep South to form a successful coalition against liberalism. The new coalition involved white Southerners and suburbanites and moved away from the ideals of the Kerner Commission. It further showed how favouring "law and order" quickly became a more palatable message for the suburban, white middle-class. Instead of a manifesto that promoted racial segregation, many Republicans who were considered moderates got behind this new strategy in response to the commission and the ideas it had encouraged. One such Republican who reimagined himself again was Richard Nixon. In 1968, most Americans approached the coming presidential election with an unhappy view of what was occurring in the country, whether due to the Vietnam War or the situation in American cities.[436] Nixon had his opening.

A new strategy was needed to appeal to these disenfranchised voters. Thus, Nixon employed new tactics effectively to win the White House in 1968. Nixon was politically skilful and positioned himself both as a champion of law and order and as a reasonable candidate who would not fully alienate more liberal members of his party.[437] In analysing Nixon's political strategist, Kevin Phillips, James Boyd's article for *The New York Times* in May 1970 notes that reactionary strategies, based on prejudices, influenced how Americans voted in the presidential election of 1968.[438] The Southern strategy that Nixon employed involved not being seen to be doing "anything that seemed faintly favourable to blacks."[439] His aides advised against attending Martin Luther King's funeral (despite

[436] Chester, Hodgson and Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968*, 39.
[437] Mark McLay, *The Republican Party and the War on Poverty:1964-1981*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 126.
[438] James Boyd, "Nixon's Southern Strategy 'It's All in the Charts'," *New York Times (1857-Current file);* 17th May 1970, 215. TimesMachine: May 17, 1970 - NYTimes.com. Accessed 18th June 2023.
[439] Rowland Evans Jr. and Robert D. Novak, *Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power,* re. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972; New York: Randon House, 1971), 137. Citations refer to the Vintage Books edition.

this, he did go), and Nixon only visited one urban ghetto (in Philadelphia) in the 1968 campaign.[440] As he showed a lack of interest in the urban ghetto, Nixon rejected the Kerner Commission's ideals. Instead, he fully embraced a Southern strategy, reinventing himself for the 1968 election. Thus, he seized upon the changed sentiments of the electorate.

Nixon's Southern strategy was instigated as a reaction to the type of liberalism the commission called for. It represented a shift in traditional Republican politics. As Boyd states, "Eastern-liberal Republicanism has lost its power to dictate party policy."[441] Boyd noted Philips believed Lindsay's political prospects in the Republican Party were non-existent, citing Lindsay's Republican primary defeat to a conservative in a bid for re-election to Mayor of New York in 1969.[442] Lindsay embodied "Eastern-liberal Republicanism"; after all, he pushed the commission in the most liberal direction possible and delivered the final summary's most impactful lines.[443]

Another socially liberal New York Republican, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, could not secure the party's presidential nomination in 1968. In 1960, Rockefeller had pushed for the party to adopt a more pro-civil rights agenda.[444] Subsequently, Rockefeller embarked on his own civil rights reforms in New York. In response to the riots in 1967, he and the Republican Governors Association Policy Committee devised a plan to tackle the urban crises.[445] This plan called for "state open housing legislation and its effective implementation so that all citizens may live where their hearts desire and their means permit."[446] Rockefeller's miscomprehension of the changed Republican Party was

[440] Ibid., 137.
[441] Boyd, "Nixon's Southern Strategy 'It's All in the Charts'."
[442] Ibid.
[443] Ibid.
[444] Galsworthy, "Carpetbaggers, Confederates, and Richard Nixon: The 1960 Presidential Election, Historical Memory, and the Republican Southern Strategy," 268.
[445] "Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller and action plan by Republican Governors Association Policy Committee regarding state leadership and riots, August 10, 1967," 10th August, 1967, Folder: 001346-018-0752, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-018-0752&accountid=7408. Accessed on 24th June 2023.
[446] Ibid.

evident when this plan noted that "complete cooperation" was necessary to enact change.[447] In 1971, Lindsay fulfilled Phillips' prediction that politicians of his political leaning had no future in the Republican Party; he switched political parties and became a Democrat. To survive in the new G.O.P., a politician had to reject the commission's branch of liberalism and embrace a shift to a new agenda.

Another example of these shifts was seen in the man Nixon selected as his running mate in 1968, Spiro Agnew (R-MD). As Governor of Maryland, Agnew went from passing a fair housing law to blaming moderate black community leaders for riots they attempted to calm.[448] Moreover, he was highly critical of the Kerner Commission, which he believed encouraged the rioters.[449] As solutions, he favoured extreme measures, such as shooting rioters.[450] Nixon's selection of Agnew was clear evidence that he was proceeding with a campaign built around this idea of "law and order" despite alienating more liberal Republicans in the process.[451] In addition, the cries for equality from black Americans were no longer met with the same urgency from reactionaries. Boyd supports this in his article on Phillips, whom he said "does not accord moral primacy to the Negro demands."[452] The Kerner Commission was met with this environment of resistance; unfortunately, it was published at a time of growing conservative retaliation, politicking against liberalism, and weariness towards any further civil rights legislation.

One example of the attitudes many elected officials took toward the possibility of further civil rights legislation is found in a letter from Senator Spessard Holland (D-FL) to his fellow Senator, Harris, congratulating him on his selection as one of the commissioners. Holland, a staunch Southern conservative and segregationist, wrote to Harris and stated his belief that: "The real fact is that many of those engaging in the rioting are really having a softer life than they have been used to in earlier

[447] Ibid.
[448] Chester, Hodgson and Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968*, 491-492.
[449] Ibid., 491-492.
[450] Ibid., 492.
[451] Evans Jr. and Novak, *Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power,* 310.
[452] Boyd, "Nixon's Southern Strategy 'It's All in the Charts'."

days – that is, more and better food, more permanent housing, and more chances for relaxation."[453] Conveniently forgetting that he voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Holland continued telling Harris: "I feel they have been spoiled by all the sumptuary legislation which has been passed and which may make them feel that they can get more and better results by demonstrating and rioting."[454] Holland saw the Civil Rights Act as a mistake.[455] Enclosed in his letter to Harris were his remarks in 1964, where he called the legislation "a tragic mistake for our country – all of it."[456] Holland was far from the only legislator who believed such legislation was federal overreach. It was evident that by 1968, they had managed to convert others to their cause.

The conservative reactionaries saw the commission as further evidence of liberal overreach. The agenda of the Great Society had drawn the ire of conservatives; even though its support benefited more white Americans, it could not shake the opinion that their programmes were mainly aimed at helping black Americans.[457] One of the successes of conservatives such as Philips was convincing white Americans from the lower and middle-class that the War on Poverty was entwined with civil rights.[458] The progressives on the Kerner Commission were seen to be convincing the rioters that they were the victims due to their placement in a society that subjugated them.[459] As a result, the commission received widespread criticism from politicians on the right.

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[453] Spessard L. Holland to Fred R. Harris, Letter, "Spessard L. Holland Correspondence with Kerner Commission member Senator Fred Harris, including Civil Rights Act of 1964, August 12 1967," 1st August 1967, Folder: 001346-017-0073, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-017-0073&accountid=7408. Accessed on 19th June 2023.

[454] Ibid.

[455] News from the Office of Spessard L. Holland (D-FL), "Spessard L. Holland Correspondence with Kerner Commission member Senator Fred Harris, including Civil Rights Act of 1964, August 12 1967," 19th June 1964, Folder: 001346-017-0073, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-017-0073&accountid=7408. Accessed on 19th June 2023.

[456] Ibid.

[457] Zeitz, B*uilding the Great Society: Inside Lyndon Johnson's White House*, 54.

[458] Ibid., 54.

[459] Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism,* XV.

The Congressional Record highlighted many of the grievances conservative politicians held. The concerns of the backlash element of Congress mirrored and reflected the problems of their reactionary constituents. The first objections voiced were repetitions of the conspiratorial untruths the commission disproved. The commission revealed that the "typical rioter" lived in the cities they rioted in.[460] Furthermore, "In Detroit and Newark about 74 percent of the rioters were bought up in the North."[461] Nevertheless, there were those in Congress who persisted with their claims. Congressman Bob Sikes (D-FL) shared his views on the final report, "It may be the most expensive trash reading in history."[462] Sikes elaborated further and offered red meat to his political base, "It carefully avoids placing blame for last summer's disturbances on the agitators who travel from city to city stirring up violence and the criminals who are quick to take advantage of any opportunity to loot and burn."[463]

Moreover, Sikes claimed that the commission did not blame those he believed responsible, such as communists or agitators, and instead, "It tries to pin responsibility on the law-abiding, tax-paying, church-going citizen for the mess our nation has experienced."[464] Furthermore, many senators shared Sikes' view. Senator Sam Ervin (D-NC) was a Southern senator who again focused on the commission seemingly giving a free pass to rioters, "Mr. President, the report charges, in essence, that all people except the rioters are responsible for the riots."[465] Sikes and Ervin were old "Dixiecrats" and segregationists, so their opinions on the report are unsurprising. Both members of Congress focussed on theories of communist involvement, which the commission disproved.

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[460] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," 7.
[461] Ibid., 7.
[462] Bob Sikes, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4909.
[463] Ibid., 4909.
[464] Ibid., 4909.
[465] Sam Ervin, "U.S. Congressional Record Senate," March 4, 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4956.

However, their comments regarding the rioters not receiving blame for the riots were keenly felt. Southern Democrats still maintained great power in the Senate and the House.

Allied with the Southern Democrats who opposed the commission were fiscally conservative Republicans, many of whom agreed with the criticism of the term "white racism". Durward Gorham Hall (R-MO) was one such Republican who scoffed, "I for one, resent this or past Congresses being dubbed as "white racist," either directly or by inference."[466] Another, John Ashbrook (R-OH), cited the police attestations and remarked that, "The Kerner Commission was so eager to whitewash the agitators that it discarded a good deal of powerful evidence."[467] What differentiated the denunciations of Hall and Ashbrook to those of the Southern Democrats were that their evaluations were primarily concerned with the cost of the commission.

Hall was a fiscal conservative with a poor record on civil rights, but summarised the report thusly, "I think the recommendations of the president's panel can be summed up in three words, 'spend more money.'"[468] Hall also slammed the commission for not costing out their proposals, a criticism he shared with Johnson, although Hall was critical of the Great Society, "How much more ought to come out of the pockets of the taxpayers boggles the imagination."[469] A staunch conservative, Ashbrook produced an anticipated reaction to the report, "As was to be expected, remedies recommended by the commission centred around massive federal aid programs, and woefully absent was reference to the individuals' responsibility for maintaining law and order."[470] Even though fiscal conservatives such as Ashbrook could understand the commission's

[466] Durward Gorham Hall, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4940.
[467] John M. Ashbrook, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4950.
[468] Hall, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 4940.
[469] Ibid., 4940.
[470] Ashbrook, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 4949.

recommendations for action, the already elevated spending of the Great Society diminished their appetite for such proposals.[471]

Strom Thurmond (R-SC) summarised the reaction of many reactionary politicians when he addressed the Senate on 13th March 1968. Thurmond was one of the most well-known anti-civil rights politicians in the United States and had been the "Dixiecrat" nominee for president in 1948. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he changed political parties to the Republican Party, as he believed that Goldwater would do more for States' rights than Johnson. His response to the Kerner Report tied the commission to Johnson. Thurmond believed the committee had called for an expansion of the Great Society, "I believe that all of us knew this Commission appointed by President Lyndon Johnson would call for more Government spending."[472] Predictably, Thurmond was shocked at the report's disparagement of white people, "It is prejudice, pure and simple, and it has no place in the report of a Presidential Commission."[473] Before he added various news articles from his home state that were critical of the commission to the Congressional Record, Thurmond concluded his remarks with a standard prediction of the segregationist reactionaries that the commission would lead to further violence, "This report will increase racial tension, will increase frustration among the people of this Nation and, in the end, will increase the very civil disorder it seeks to prevent."[474] He justified this reasoning because the report had called for "astronomical Government spending."[475]

The House Ways and Means Committee that Wilbur Mills (D-AR) led was a formidable proponent of cutting federal spending and balancing the budget. Mills proved to be a significant obstacle to the commission and the Great Society because of his fiscally conservative nature. He had consistently resisted the economic policies of both John F. Kennedy and Johnson, especially their tax

[471] Ibid., 4950.
[472] Strom Thurmond, "U.S. Congressional Record Senate," 13th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, 6394, Congressional Record | Congress.gov | Library of Congress. Accessed 13th June 2023.
[473] Ibid., 6394.
[474] Ibid., 6394.
[475] Ibid., 6394.

cuts, as he considered them unwise.[476] Therefore, Kerner's hope for new taxes to pay for the commission's recommendations on top of the nearly $80 billion military budget, that Vietnam had swollen, was not attainable.[477] As one example, Senator Clark knew a lack of will among politicians to get the level of financial support required was problematic, and the public lacked the enthusiasm to pay for it.[478] In response to Kerner's testimony, he acknowledged that the anti-poverty programmes came with a hefty price tag and that the Ways and Means Committee, the Senate, and the president were not going to push for it; fundamentally, this meant seeking the funds from the military budget.[479] However, at this stage, this was impossible. The lack of nationwide consensus was a key reason for the commission's failed legacy.

Nixon was the conservative who benefited the most from the changed political environment, and his reaction to the published report demonstrated the type of critique the commission received from conservative politicians. In a speech broadcast on the NBC radio network on 7th March, Nixon focused on order.[480] Entitled "A Commitment to Order", the address was Nixon's not-so-subtle critique of the Kerner Report's conclusions and suggestions, whilst it also functioned as a method of simultaneously clarifying his thoughts on urban unrest.[481] Nixon's order message was clear, "But there can be no progress without order, no freedom without order, no justice without order."[482] He continued his address and stuck to his central theme, "And so our first commitment as a nation, in this time of crisis and questioning, must be a commitment to order."[483]

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[476] Ira Stoll, *JFK Conservative,* re. ed. (New York: Mariner, 2014; Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 130. Citations refer to the Mariner edition.
[477] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 114.
[478] Ibid., 114.
[479] Ibid., 114.
[480] Richard Nixon, "Remarks on the NBC Radio Network: A Commitment to Order," online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, 7th March 1968, NBC Radio Network, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/326735. Accessed 6th June 2023.
[481] Ibid.
[482] Ibid.
[483] Ibid.

At the heart of the message and the belief in "law and order" was the opinion that rioting and violence could not be justified. Such a message was understandable and palatable for those who did not wish to delve into the deep-rooted problems within the urban ghettos. Nixon's speech also struck a non-committal tone when it addressed the needs of those living in urban poverty, "We must move with both compassion and conviction to bring the American dream to the ghetto."[484] At the same time, he contradictorily claimed, "There has never been less cause for violence."[485] Such statements were designed to make his target audience feel better about their criticisms of the ghetto inhabitants. Nixon carefully catered his remarks to the white middle-class and outlined concepts that defined his election messaging.

In his address, Nixon acknowledged and stoked the fears of the white middle-class who reacted negatively to the Kerner Report. In a call back to Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms, and in particular the freedom from fear, Nixon provided the listener with four fears: "fear of the loss of individuality, fear of human obsolescence, fear of economic deprivation – but the central fear is the most primitive the fear of physical violence."[486] Fear and the resulting political unwillingness to take further action was a factor that Republicans tapped into; indeed, the fear of crime and lawlessness was prevalent ahead of the 1968 elections. In invoking the four freedoms, Nixon had implied that the riots were un-American and that following "law and order" was the American way.

The theme of fear was visible in Nixon's election adverts as well. He used fear effectively as an undertone throughout his campaign messaging. It worked collaboratively with his pledge to bring "law and order" to the country. In one advert, Nixon's campaign tied the two themes together as it showed scenes of rioting and buildings aflame before Nixon announced, "Let us recognise that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence. So I pledge to you we shall

[484] Ibid.
[485] Ibid.
[486] Ibid.

have order in the United States."[487] The message in the advert was not one of positivity or hope; it concluded with a message on the screen: "This time vote like your whole world depended on it."[488] Another advert, which directly contrasted images of riots with pictures of a picturesque, suburban American life, proposed the following to the viewer: "We see Americans hating each other, fighting each other, killing each other at home. We see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night. As we see and hear those things, millions of Americans cry out in anguish, did we come all this way for this?"[489] The advert served as a direct message to the silent majority, as Nixon listed those who felt disenfranchised and now had a voice in him.[490] Nixon listed off many characteristics of whom this voice belonged, most notably, "It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators."[491]

These adverts implied that Nixon would listen to the silent majority and not the cries of those stuck in despair in the nation's inner-city ghettos. As the Nixon campaign harnessed another characteristic of white America, it successfully spoke to those it claimed the current administration had "forgotten."[492] The idea that the white middle-classes were the "forgotten" proved to be a powerful message; it is also the opposite of what the Kerner Commission did, as Harry McPherson acknowledged, "That the government and the foundations and the news media, everybody was concentrating on the poor Negro down in the central city and had forgotten this guy out there."[493] Of the forgotten, Nixon also claimed, "They are not racist."[494] The motif of fear returned in a third advert. In this advert, a white, elderly, middle-class woman walks alone down a deserted street at

[487] *Richard Nixon [Republican] 1968 Campaign Ad "Law and Order"*, Congressional Archives Carl Albert Centre, Nixon-Agnew T.V. Committee, 1968, video file posted 24th June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lV_14O5wuDM. Accessed 6th June 2023.
[488] Ibid.
[489] *Richard Nixon [Republican] 1968 Campaign Ad "Look at America"*, Congressional Archives Carl Albert Centre, Nixon-Agnew T.V. Committee, 1968, video file posted 24th June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZrlGMJWDk8. Accessed 6th June 2023.
[490] Ibid.
[491] Ibid.
[492] Ibid.
[493] Harry McPherson, interview IV, transcript, LBJ Library Oral Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.
[494] *Richard Nixon [Republican] 1968 Campaign Ad "Look at America".*

night as Nixon reeled off statistics of violent crimes.[495] He concluded his message with a refrain of the freedom from fear, "Freedom from fear is a basic right for every American, we must restore it."[496] These adverts demonstrated how critical fear was to the Nixon campaign.

Fear was (and remains) a determining factor in the electorate's choice of candidate. It was why many Americans voted for Johnson in 1964, and in 1968, it was why many turned to Nixon or Wallace.[497] As Scammon and Wattenberg stated, "When voters are afraid, they will vote their fears."[498] When Nixon spoke of such fears, he indubitably referred to the concerns of white society; this played to the majority of the voting electorate, as it was not sensible politics for Nixon to seek the black vote. Consequently, black American fears were neglected in the changed political landscape. The concerns of black Americans about the Republican candidate were certainly justified as Nixon pursued his Southern strategy, and as president Nixon would do little to alleviate their worries, and he soon "was on his way to becoming the President most disliked and distrusted by Negroes since the rise of black political power following World War II."[499] Such voting patterns were to the detriment of the Kerner Commission.

White flight was also evidence of the fear in white society. As a sociological event, it predated the Kerner Commission, but its effects contributed to the understanding of the adverse reaction the commission received. White flight had separated white and black Americans along race lines as more affluent and socially mobile white Americans left the cities and headed for the suburbs. Furthermore, a culture of questioning why black Americans were seemingly constantly receiving government support also existed. The belief in reverse discrimination was demonstrated in one of the documents the Kerner Commission collected. The commission proposed new housing projects,

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[495] *Richard Nixon [Republican] 1968 Campaign Ad "Woman: Personal Safety"*, Congressional Archives Carl Albert Centre, Nixon-Agnew T.V. Committee, 1968, video file posted 24th June 2020, Richard Nixon [Republican] 1968 Campaign Ad "Woman: Personal Safety" - YouTube. Accessed 6th June 2023.
[496] Ibid.
[497] Broder, "Election of 1968," 3705-3865, 3716.
[498] Scammon and Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, 44.
[499] Evans Jr. and Novak, *Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power,* 134-135.

but even before that proposal, opposition from realtors to new projects was present. In a statement for the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), a New Jersey-based realtor was angered at the thought of these plans; he lamented, "How ridiculous the efforts to insist on new housing for the lowest income group, while those who pay the bill live in existing structures."[500] He continued, "Furthermore, why must those in the lowest income strata live in brand new housing?"[501] This fuelled the perception that the liberal Kerner Commission was seen to be rewarding the rioters.

The NAREB report and the letters sent to the commission also implied a fear of "reverse discrimination."[502] Despite the Commission's best efforts, many voters felt the federal government provided "everything on a silver platter" for black Americans.[503] Nixon himself drew on another response that would become part of the Republican playbook as he blamed the other side for intolerance and hatred, "We increasingly hear cries that ours is an unjust society, that the whole power structure, the whole economic and social and political structure, is evil and ought to be destroyed."[504] After he made the central point in his argument against the status quo, he concluded his point and asserted, "The message is still one of intolerance and hate, and it still is wrong."[505]

Fear further manifested itself in the immediate reaction in Congress and across the country to the commission. On Monday 11th March, four days after Nixon's address, the Senate added an amendment Strom Thurmond advocated for (The so-called H. Rap Brown amendment, which made it a federal crime to cross state lines with the intent to incite a riot) to the Civil Rights Act, Martin

[500] Alexander Summer, statement for consideration to the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) at its annual convention in Washington D.C. beginning 10th November 1967, statement transcript, "Kerner Commission hearings and related documents, October 23-24, 1967," October 24, 1967, Folder: 001346-014-0548, Data related to the Commission hearings [Series 31], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-014-0548&accountid=7408. Assessed 6th June 2023.
[501] Ibid.
[502] Powledge, "Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive."
[503] Ibid.
[504] Richard Nixon, "Remarks on the NBC Radio Network: A Commitment to Order."
[505] Ibid.

Luther King received vitriolic heckling in an affluent Michigan neighbourhood and Nixon himself won the New Hampshire Republican primary with 79% of the vote.[506] White retaliation was everywhere.

In the Nixon White House, Johnson's failure to speedily endorse the Kerner Commission is given further context. Following his election on the back of a groundswell of white, conservative support, Nixon was predisposed to not proceed with any additional civil rights legislation. White society would be further implicated in perpetuating the ghetto when outcry from the suburban base in 1970 forced Nixon to decry his Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, former Michigan Governor George Romney (whom Johnson had sparred with over the Detroit riots and the deployment of the National Guard) for his Open Communities plan to push through integration.[507] By 1973, Nixon proclaimed that white communities would not have to endure being required to accept public housing.[508] That same year, at the start of Nixon's second term, Romney stood down as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Meanwhile, Nixon gradually cut funding to the more unpopular parts of the Great Society, one of which was the Model Cities programme, as the problems of the inner cities became forgotten.

The response of conservative politicians undoubtedly factored into Johnson's mind and his administration as the Kerner Commission featured on the front pages in the first weeks of March 1968. Their electoral triumphs proved their response to the Kerner Report was politically popular. Therefore, Johnson's reluctance to support the commission can be viewed in how he knew which way the political winds were blowing. The report had failed with a key target audience, and that audience delivered Johnson a clear rebuttal.

The Reaction of Liberal and Moderate Politicians

[506] Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America,* 241.
[507] Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, 201.
[508] Ibid., 37.

By contrast, liberal Democrats considered the report brave and daring. In congressional hearings, the commission's members were praised for the bravery and significance of their work.[509] However, the Kerner Commission did not win over those who might have been sympathetic enough to persuade Johnson to embrace the report any quicker. Some of the commissioners' public statements in Congress served as evidence of this disappointment. Harris and Kerner appeared before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty on 13th March 1968. In response to an article by Joseph Kraft that appeared in *The Washington Post* on 10th March and subsequently entered into the record by Senator Clark, Harris countered that he did not solely blame poor white people for the racial situation; instead, he stated that it was: "All of us in this country who are responsible, in one way or another for racial discrimination."[510] More broadly speaking, this statement blamed all white people. Although Harris suffered no political repercussions for his controversial comment, the blowback was focused on the commission; its brave conclusions looked even more divisive to many Americans who were apathetic toward civil rights.

The most devoted commissioners were unwilling to accept the will to act from Johnson, and many Americans, did not exist. Harris argued that racism was the nation's most significant concern and observed, "We have temporized with facing it for so long that now there is no greater national need which takes priority over ridding ourselves of it."[511] Harris' comments addressed the more significant problems that *de jure* and *de facto* segregation permeated American society. Still, it also spoke to the lack of will that the Kerner Commission received from Congress and the broader American public. In 1968, Vietnam had permeated every part of American life, dividing society, family, and friends. The war certainly drained the finances and patience of Congress. The war's effects proved unavoidable for the commissioners as they sought to answer questions about financing the commission's suggested programmes. James Corman took questions in his role as a

[509] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938*, 109
[510] Ibid., 122.
[511] Ibid., 124.

commissioner from the Congressional Joint Economic Committee on 28th May 1968. At this time, the commission's report had been out for three months, Johnson had ruled himself out of the presidential race, and Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated. In a letter to Ginsburg on 17th October 1967, Corman urged the commission to be "brutally honest" so white Americans understood the problems of the ghettos.[512] In his testimony in May 1968, Corman claimed that America must address its problems in Vietnam and domestically at the same time.[513] He urged those on the committee to "not pit them against each other, but rather, put our own skills and resources toward solutions of both."[514] The inflated military expenditure the military-industrial complex drove, and the lack of drive from the American people, increased the difficulty of finding solutions to meet the issues the commission sought to address. Corman's statements proved you could be honest about the problems in American society, but that honesty did not generate the enthusiasm to act.

The political leanings of its members proved to be another weakness of the commission. Lindsay, in particular, was too interested in interweaving his politics into the report. The commissioners who were politicians had a political agenda; Lindsay and Harris undoubtedly sought to counter the conservative faction amongst the commission's members.[515] Without a doubt, they over-compensated. Lindsay and Harris got their way. Thus, their infighting over the commission's direction weakened the report before it even reached Johnson's desk.

Congress neglected much of the commission's agenda. In the hearings held on the 28th May 1968, Representative Donald Rumsfeld (R-IL) observed that there had been a lack of outreach by

[512] James Corman to David Ginsburg, Letter, "Comments on Outline of Kerner Commission Interim Report, October 17, 1967," 17th October 1967, Folder: 001346-016-0477, Subject Files of the Office of the Executive Director [Series 46], Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969, Part V: Records of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001346-016-0477&accountid=7408. Accessed on 18th June 2023.
[513] Joint Economic Committee, *Hearings on Employment and Manpower Problems in the Cities: Implications of the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 28th May 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 27, entitlementkeys=1234|app-gis|hearing|hrg-1968-ecj-0010 (proquest.com). Accessed 6th June 2023.
[514] Ibid.
[515] Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, 204.

Congress. Rumsfeld later served in the Nixon administration as his Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity and had voted in favour of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, The Voting Rights Act of 1965, and The Civil Rights Act of 1968; hence, he can be described as pro-civil rights. He supported the report and agreed with the commission's categorisation of the race crisis as the most critical issue the United States faced. However, he acknowledged that Congress had effectively ignored the commission. In questioning Corman, Rumsfeld drew attention to this fact in the following revealing exchange, which is quoted in full:

> "Representative Rumsfeld: Has there, to your knowledge, been any comprehensive look at this report by the Congress since March 2, when the report was issued? I don't know of any."
>
> "Representative Corman: No sir. This is the first time any of us as members have been invited to testify."
>
> "Representative Rumsfeld: This is the first time you have been invited before a committee of the Congress to discuss this?"
>
> "Representative Corman: Yes."
>
> "Representative Rumsfeld: It has been nearly 3 months, 90 days, since your report was issued about what certainly is the single most important problem that our country is facing today. It concerns me, and it seems to me that the Congress has an obligation here."[516]

Although commissioners did testify to Congress about related subjects where the commission was addressed, Rumsfeld highlighted a key point: Congress could have done more to engage with the report's suggestions. The public did listen to the report as it sold well, but Congress was more reluctant, aside from reactionaries shutting down the commission. Hence, Rumsfeld said, "Well, I

[516] Joint Economic Committee, *Hearings on Employment and Manpower Problems in the Cities: Implications of the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 28th May 1968, 90th Cong., 32.

certainly have not heard of any comprehensive effort by the Congress that can be taken with a minimum of debate and discussion."[517] Rumsfeld's remarks implied that Johnson did not push the report on any member of Congress, nor was the legislative branch committed to getting further answers from the president. Those in support of the commission had not reacted strongly enough. They had not forced the president into a commitment. Some liberals had allowed Johnson to remain silent.

In turn, Johnson's silence meant many members of Congress did not feel the need to speak out and support the commission. A *New York Times* editorial on 21st March 1968 argued Johnson's (and Nixon's) "evasion of responsibility is profoundly important because many others in lesser positions of leadership in Congress take their cues on policy from these two men."[518] This is the same argument that Rumsfeld would make two months later.

However, in the same vein as the wider public and press, Congress had focussed on the report's headlines and had not considered what could be achievable. In the same hearings, Representative Thomas B. Curtis (R-MO) discussed the problems with the commission and the media's use of white racism as a central reason behind the riots.[519] Curtis mainly favoured civil rights throughout his time in office yet acknowledged that the commission's language was problematic, "This widely publicized statement of the commission that white racism is the root cause is not true."[520] Curtis elaborated, "Not that it isn't important, but to treat it as basic distracts us from what the real problem is."[521] When the commission was reviewed, the report and Congress had their detractors, and it was clear that fault existed on both sides.

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[517] Ibid., 32.
[518] "On Reading the Riot Report" *New York Times,* 21st March 1968, 46. TimesMachine: March 21, 1968 - NYTimes.com. Accessed on 15th September 2023.
[519] Joint Economic Committee, *Hearings on Employment and Manpower Problems in the Cities: Implications of the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 28th May 1968, 90th Cong., 45.
[520] Ibid., 45.
[521] Ibid., 45.

Not all of Congress were against the commission's report. Thus, congressional backlash was not the most important reason for Johnson's initial rejection. The commission maintained a great deal of support. In congressional hearings where commissioners testified, they were met with a largely sympathetic audience who understood the concerns they sought to address and the depth of the problem they exposed. Among the most vociferous in his support was Jacob Javits. Javits, like Lindsay, whom he counted as a personal friend, was a liberal Republican from New York. For Javits, the city crisis had equal priority to Vietnam.[522] Although supportive, Javits was far from unrealistic when he considered the extent of the commission's reach. He claimed, "An increase in benefits brings an increase in expectations, and this is one of the endemic problems in these programs, which only feeds the flames of discontent and thereby makes more likely the eruption of that discontent and riots and violence."[523] Nevertheless, he supported and publicly backed the commission when very few other members of Congress did. Javits, as a Republican, pledged, "I have no desire to see the administration fall on its face in this matter. I will vote, I will work, I will do everything in the world, I will come forward with our suggestions and ideas for a bill, and I hope and pray the president will have the wit to give the report the priority it deserves and back it."[524] However, Republicans such as Javits and Lindsay would soon disappear.

Less partisan members of Congress from both parties understood the gravity of the commission's findings. Senator Minority Leader Everett Dirksen called the final report "disquieting."[525] Dirksen had been the man Johnson had turned to for bipartisanship in the past, and the Republican Senate leader now believed that the final report served as a "tragic indictment of our times and our unwillingness to face up to reality."[526] Alongside Dirksen's solemn review of the Kerner Commission were those in the House and the Senate who called for the report's

[522] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 79.
[523] Ibid., 95.
[524] Ibid., 129.
[525] Everett Dirksen, "U.S. Congressional Record Senate," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4957.
[526] Ibid., 4957.

recommendations to be implemented. Representative Augustus Hawkins (D-CA) observed, "Immediate action in implementing the commission's recommendations is critically essential."[527] Another House member, Representative Chet Holifield (D-CA), noted how mayors of Los Angeles, Atlanta, Newark, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Detroit had all declared support for the commission's proposals on television.[528] Bi-partisan support in Congress demonstrated that the Kerner Commission did not have universal rejection. Some of the backing of the commission was strong.

Of those who showed support in Congress, the most robust support came from Senator Walter Mondale (D-MN). A liberal who later served as vice president (1977-1981) and his party's nominee for president in 1984, in 1968, Mondale was an emerging voice in the Senate, having been appointed to replace Hubert Humphrey when he became vice president. Mondale wanted to use the report's call for action to push through the open housing bill that had become stuck in the Senate at the time of his words on 2nd March 1968, as it awaited its fourth cloture vote.[529] When he elaborated on why he backed the commission, Mondale compared it to medical "treatment."[530] In addition, Mondale stated the report was critical: "It bluntly tells the patient the source of his symptoms – white racism."[531] Mondale's vociferous defence of the commission extended to the white racism conclusion as well, which he compared to a cancer diagnosis, saying it is "just as threatening."[532] Therefore, he issued a rallying cry, "We must have fair housing. We must have greater opportunity. We must destroy the cancer of white racism."[533] Mondale knew the urgency and depth of the problem, and his pleas to the Senate that day clarified this.

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[527] Augustus Hawkins, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4937.
[528] Chet Holifield, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4909.
[529] Walter Mondale, "U.S. Congressional Record Senate," 2nd March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4898.
[530] Ibid., 4899.
[531] Ibid., 4899.
[532] Ibid., 4899.
[533] Ibid., 4899.

Those who supported the commission cannot be accused of underestimating the political effort required to achieve its goals. For example, Hawkins knew that endorsing the report's findings and a pledge to support the raising of taxes that was likely to follow was a politically brave move.[534] He also acknowledged that such a move was against the direction of current political discourse, "The task is a most difficult one for political decisions are involved which require a complete reversal of current trends to take the easy way out by voting against taxes in an election year, knuckling under to the white backlash."[535] As Johnson could attest to, and Hawkins articulated, "The record of the present Congress on voting for those things that form the basics of the commission's recommendations is far from hopeful."[536] Therefore, although the commission clearly had liberal support, the views of the 90th Congress as a collective meant that any politicians who supported it, including Johnson, were restricted in the level of endorsement they could give. The extent of resistance from reactionaries proved more significant.

The widespread counterattacks against the commission report evidenced that congressional support amongst a few did not equate to support amongst the many. Javits drew attention to the fact that there might have been those in Congress who supported the commission and prioritised its objectives. Still, in the national consciousness and elsewhere in Congress, this was not the case, as he stated before Kerner's testimony to the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty that "This is not reflected in our budget, it is not reflected in the focus of national attention."[537] Kerner added comments, hoping that more people were receptive to the commission's messages, "I wish more people would get themselves involved in what we have in this report."[538] On 24th July 1968, Lindsay also called out Congress for their inaction on the commission's proposals.[539]

[534] Hawkins, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 4937.
[535] Ibid., 4937.
[536] Ibid., 4938.
[537] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 95.
[538] Ibid., 98.
[539] Special to the New York Times, "Lindsay Scores Congress Delay," *New York Times,* 25th July 1968. TimesMachine: July 25, 1968 - NYTimes.com. Accessed on 14th September 2023.

Nevertheless, support in Congress for the commission remained, support Johnson could have called upon should he have decided to push for another support programme for the ghettos.

Vietnam started drawing much more congressional attention as the Johnson administration reached its final year, and the war came into greater focus at the time the commission concluded its research. The failure to dip into the military budget or draw an equivalency between spending in Vietnam and the cities attracted the ire of liberals, most notably Robert Kennedy. His opposition would primarily be directed at Johnson as opposed to the commission itself but attested to the reality of the president's situation. Kennedy was complimentary of the commission. In these hearings, he made a moral equivalency between the soldiers fighting in Vietnam and children not receiving an education of any worth in the United States.[540] Kennedy's speech at the Cleveland City Club further supported his belief in how issues abroad and in the United States were entwined.[541] He observed, "Some Americans who preach nonviolence abroad fail to practice it here at home."[542]

Other frequent critiques of the war shared Kennedy's views. Congressman William Fitts Ryan (D-NY) had actively opposed the war throughout Johnson's presidency, and thus, he viewed the commission as an essential document to reinforce his views. His opinions were similar to those of Kennedy, Javits, and Harris, as he declared in Congress, "We must begin to face the problems in the streets of our cities and put them ahead of the streets of Saigon."[543] The choice of liberals to frame the discussion of a decision between Vietnam and the cities meant the Johnson administration was further entrenched. They used the commission to challenge American involvement in Vietnam. As Ryan stated, "We lack neither the money nor the means to carry through our struggle and to solve the urban crisis."[544] On the other hand, Ryan's suggestion of paying for the report seemed naïve, "If

[540] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 129.
[541] Kennedy, "Remarks to the Cleveland City Club," 5th April 1968, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.
[542] Ibid.
[543] William Fitts Ryan, "U.S. Congressional Record House of Representatives," 4th March 1968, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 1968, Vol.114 U.S. Congressional Record, (Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, Middelburg, Netherlands), 4910.
[544] Ibid., 4910

we can spend $30 billion a year for the war in Southeast Asia, then we can afford the expenditure of $30 billion a year to meet the problems which are highlighted by the report of the president's Commission on Civil Disorders."[545] Liberals often struggled with the same money problems as the commission when they advocated for urgent action.

The persistent question Congress posed concerned finances; as Clark reiterated, "What are we going to do about the military situation and how are we going to pay for these programs?"[546] In the 28th May 1968 congressional hearing on the Commission, Proxmire expressed his concerns over federal subsidies for tax incentives and training programmes.[547] Such assertions conflicted with commissioners such as Harris, who viewed the ongoing battle over civil rights as the most pressing problem that affected the United States, which meant the commission was on a collision course with the beliefs of Congress.

Conclusion: Why Backlash Influenced Johnson

The reluctance of Congress and the national populace to pledge greater support to the commission was a significant factor as it became a forgotten part of history instead of serving as a catalyst for further action. The hesitancy of Congress made it easier for Johnson to discount it. However, it was clear that many in Congress did support the commission or, at the very least, were sympathetic to its aims. What congressional resistance did attest to was Johnson's increased reluctance to help his commission. When concluding an assessment of the racial backlash to the Kerner Commission, it is clear that a successful and well-established group of conservative politicians and the white suburban middle-class, had created a situation where the report was met with what Johnson feared would be "a white backlash in Congress and across the nation."[548] Johnson's fears were not misguided, and his rejection of the report can be attributed to his eagerness to distance himself from anything that bore

[545] Ibid., 4910.
[546] Senate, *Hearings on S. 3063, S. 3249, S. 2938,* 124.
[547] Joint Economic Committee, *Hearings on Employment and Manpower Problems in the Cities: Implications of the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 90th Cong., 19-20.
[548] Califano, Jr., T*he Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years*, 217.

a resemblance to a domestic equivalent of the Marshall Plan (President Harry Truman's initiative, named after Secretary of State George Marshall to refinance Europe after World War II). His rejection came amid the fear of reaction from his more conservative critics and the knowledge he lacked the political capital for an ambitious agenda of this kind.[549]

Johnson was met with greater congressional resistance to his domestic policies when the commission released its findings. As aforementioned, the House Ways and Means Committee had temporarily stopped Johnson's tax bill and wanted deep cuts to his Great Society in exchange for its passage. Conservatives were also opposed to Johnson's Model Cities bill, which resulted in a weaker programme that did not solve many of the troubles the Kerner Report later challenged.[550] The Model Cities legislation was also seen as a programme to appease the ghetto protesters, and it passed with very slim margins.[551] Thus, when the Kerner Commission published its report recommending $30 billion of additional spending on the cities, Johnson was stunned at how he was expected to finance such actions.[552] In that significant call with Mayor Daley on 13th March 1968, Johnson discussed the dilemma he now found himself in and stated the full figure called for was around $80 billion, of which Johnson said, "I got no place to get the 80, I can't borrow it. I can't tax it."[553] However, Johnson did not press ahead and try.

Alongside the logistical resistance, the reaction from the white middle-classes would have upset Johnson even more. Their lack of appetite for enacting the commission's goals restricted his political bargaining power, which was already at the lowest point in his presidency. Furthermore, it showed the president that in the late 1960s, deep, irreparable fissures now existed in the traditional Democratic voting bloc. However, large swathes of Congress still offered support, most notably senators such as Kennedy and Javits, Congressmen who thought similarly to Rumsfeld and Curtis,

[549] "Putting First Things First", *New York Times.*
[550] Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973,* 321.
[551] Ibid.
[552] Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America,* 239.
[553] "Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard J. Daley on 13 March 1968."

and those in the broader United States who were dedicated to civil rights and considered it a serious national problem. In the same February 1968 *New York Times* poll that had placed crime and lawlessness as the nation's most pressing concern, civil rights were in second place.[554] Therefore, the failure to push the Kerner Commission's agenda returned to Johnson. Despite the congressional and domestic backlash, passing legislation on civil rights was possible. For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 was passed after the commission published its report. The assassination of King catalysed this, but it demonstrated that in Congress, some could have been convinced. However, Johnson was not the man to persuade them; this meant the more conservative, risk-averse members of Congress prevailed. Those who were hostile got their wish.

The nature of the Kerner Commission's proposals, such as expanding job opportunities, education support, and fair housing for black Americans, led to fear and alienation for many in white society. The Nixon and Wallace campaigns offered a solution to these fears. Many were tired of hearing that the significant effort toward expanded rights still needed to be increased. Of course, this was the reality; however, it was complicated to accept. Therefore, the success of Nixon and the nearly ten million votes Wallace received in the 1968 presidential election proved that the commission was not a product of its time.

[554] Special to the New York Times, "Poll finds crime top fear at home."

Conclusion: Why did Lyndon B. Johnson not Initially Welcome the Kerner Commission?

When Lyndon Johnson first received the report, he cast aside the commission. His personality and personalisation of problems were behind his deduction that initially snubbing the report was the correct course of action. However, in a limited setting, in the following weeks, Johnson admitted that he supported the commission's goals. After he had exited the presidential race and with King's assassination, the Civil Rights Act of 1968, also called the Fair Housing Act, was passed. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 enshrined the open housing provisions the commission called for into law, outlawing discrimination in property sales based on race. However, the assassination of King is often credited as the primary catalyst, despite the commission and King calling for very similar actions on housing reform. Shortly after winning the California primary, Robert F. Kennedy was shot on 5th June 1968, passing away the following day. . At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, demonstrators protested against the Vietnam War and the power of the party's leaders. Johnson did not appear. Nixon's election was the final nail for any hope of success for the commission's brand of liberalism. The commission's condemnation of white racism became forgotten.

The principal reason for the commission's initial failure is that Johnson did not get behind the commission early enough. Furthermore, the Vietnam War had brought out the worst aspects of his character. He deflected responsibility, blamed his commissioners for their chosen direction, and convinced himself he had done all he could do. By the time Johnson had acknowledged the commission's positives, it was too late. Congress and the white middle-class backlash had diminished any hope of the commission's solid recommendations forming the basis of another Johnson domestic legislation push. Johnson's political enemies had spoken on the commission and thus dictated its direction.

The white backlash to the commission had a limited long-term impact, suggesting that it was not the principal reason Johnson initially rejected the commission's report. Wallace's vote in 1968

proved weaker than expected, and Nixon's victory was not significant enough to give him the mandate to undo the Great Society. On the contrary, the domestic policies of Lyndon Johnson remained popular. As a collective, Congress remained liberal, minorities gradually began to increase their numbers in government, and the Democratic Party started to find a new political base. This political base did help the Democrats maintain control in the Senate until the 1980 elections and in the House until the elections in 1994. Nixon was responsible in many places for enacting legislation that would not have looked out of place in the Great Society, including founding the Environmental Protection Agency.

Regardless of the Kerner Commission's lack of lasting success, the report is a significant document in the history of race relations in the United States. Its lessons are as relevant today as ever. The shocking deaths of Michael Brown and George Floyd in 2014 and 2020 were among many casualties that drew nationwide attention to the police's treatment of black Americans. However, little evidence suggests that the Kerner Report's calls for national action and racial equality would be heeded even 55 years after the commission published its findings. Tragically, the truths the commission spoke of in 1968 are as relevant today as they were then.

The 50th anniversary of the commission has led to an analysis of the final report and why it was time to remember it again. The landmark work of the commissioners was ultimately fruitless. America had other significant concerns. Just two years after the riots, the United States invested a massive amount of money to put a man on the moon. Historian Alice George recognised, "Ultimately, going to the moon was far easier than solving the nation's racial issues."[555] Another article called the commission's report "the "wokest" document ever produced by the federal

[555] Alice George, "The 1968 Kerner Commission Got It Right, But Nobody Listened," *Smithsonian Magazine,* 1st March 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/1968-kerner-commission-got-it-right-nobody-listened-180968318/.

government on race matters."[556] As the United States emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic with cultural divides even more prevalent, the commission served as an early example of the cracks that divided American society. The final report was one of the first actions of an emerging culture war that has continued in the United States. Its opponents argued against it with half-truths and poorly disguised racial dog whistles, and its proponents insisted it should have been acted upon. The same opinion piece concluded that the report erected "a seemingly permanent demarcation between conservative law-and-order advocates who decried it as justifying lawlessness and political activists of various stripes."[557] Therefore, the commission's impact was not something it intended; instead of instigating positive changes in America's cities, it was a significant factor in helping to shape a divided nation.

Despite its many positives, the commission can rightly be criticised for its failures. These failures had both short and long-lasting consequences. In the long term, the commission did not address the racial conflict and its approach was focused on relations between white and black Americans. This meant the report did not allocate time for the racism experienced by Asian or Latino Americans.[558] The vilification of both communities has only magnified these failings over the past fifty-five years. The election of Trump in 2016 was based on a platform that attacked Latin-Americans, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought a scourge of violence against Asian-Americans. White racism affected these communities as well; whether that was immigration challenges or problems in urban areas, the challenge of overcoming hatred was ever-present.[559]

In the short term, no action was taken on the commission for two reasons: the commission's failures to address or comprehend the depth of racial resentment and the involvement of President Johnson. The level of language used in the report had stirred retaliatory emotions across the

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[556] Peniel Joseph, "One of today's 'wokest' moments happened in 1968," *CNN,* 2nd February 2018, One of today's 'wokest' moments happened in 1968 (Opinion) | CNN.
[557] Ibid.
[558] Zelizer, "Introduction to the 2016 Edition," in The Kerner Report, *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,* xxxv.
[559] Ibid.

country. Phrases such as: “White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II” turned many white Americans away from the report.[560] Precisely what made the commission stand out meant that a broad spectrum of white society condemned it. Reactionary and fiscal conservatives were united in Congress as well. Conservatives and budget hawks were worried about the president embarking on another expensive domestic policy push. However, Johnson was even more aggrieved at his commission for failing to adequately cost out their programmes or understand how they would be financed. Liberals on the commission implied that the funding for the report’s call to arms would have come from ending the war in Vietnam. This demonstrated another failure of the commission; it could not moderate the debate and reach a middle ground, meaning that its liberal members steered it to the left.

On the 31st March 1968, Lyndon Johnson delivered a remarkable speech. He announced a pause in the bombing over much of North Vietnam and offered to restart peace talks with the North Vietnamese; furthermore, he declared: “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.”[561] Whether his speech is considered honourable, a political move to gain back some semblance of momentum for a final push in a presidency he knew was over, or the acceptance of the political reality is up for debate. Most likely, his decision was a combination of all three considerations. However, Lyndon Johnson was correct when he declared, “I think America will be a stronger nation, a more just society, and a land of greater opportunity and fulfilment because of what we have all done together in these years of unparalleled achievement.”[562] On the other hand, Johnson was also right when he said, “There is divisiveness

[560] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, “The Kerner Report: The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,” 10.
[561] Lyndon B. Johnson, “March 31, 1968: Remarks on Decision not to Seek Re-election,” transcript of speech delivered at Washington, D.C. 31sr March 1968, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-31-1968-remarks-decision-not-seek-re-election. Accessed 9th August 2023.
[562] Ibid.

among us all tonight."[563] Johnson's farewell speech served as a reminder of why he failed to embrace the Kerner Commission in the first place and why that was a disappointment.

The Kerner Commission warned of a divided society, and Lyndon Johnson told the nation it was divided. When the commission was presented to him, Johnson was not at the forefront of liberal thought. Due to events in Vietnam, he was trapped, unable to drive change as he had done in the early years of his presidency. Liberals from Johnson's staff, his adversaries, and even his vice president disagreed with his instinctive reactions to the commission's report. Regardless, conservatives and reactionaries blamed him for the report's contents. The commission had set up Johnson to fail.

Therefore, Lyndon Johnson initially rejected the Kerner Commission because he felt he had no other option. He had always been a pragmatic politician, and sometimes he was indecisive. However, he did not help himself when presented with the opportunity to admit his support for the commission's findings. Upon receiving the report, he raged at Califano for the lack of credit he and his Great Society were given and for the commissioner's political naivety. It was clear to many people who gave accounts of his reaction that the commission personally hurt him. He retreated to Texas and Georgia and refused to acknowledge the commission publicly, giving speeches in comfortable surroundings.[564] From there, the president went on to Puerto Rico, where he also made no public acknowledgement of the commission.[565] He instead relaxed with a lighter schedule and a game of golf.[566] As the report became a best seller and its allies in Congress started asking questions, he again demurred and ranted about Robert Kennedy to Richard Daley and Richard Russell. However, what emerged from these phone calls was an admission that he liked the proposals and

[563] Ibid.
[564] Presidential Daily Diary, 1st March 1968, President's Daily Diary Collection, LBJ Presidential Library, President's Daily Diary entry, 3/1/1968 · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 13th August 2023.
[565] Presidential Daily Diary, 2nd March 1968, President's Daily Diary Collection, LBJ Presidential Library, President's Daily Diary entry, 3/2/1968 · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 13th August 2023. And Presidential Daily Diary, 3rd March 1968, President's Daily Diary Collection, LBJ Presidential Library, President's Daily Diary entry, 3/3/1968 · Discover Production (discoverlbj.org). Accessed 13th August 2023.
[566] Ibid.

the commission's message. The civil rights president understood that the battle for equality was far from over. Finally, he planted a question and admitted support for the commission, but the funding question hung over him.

Johnson's statements, both public and private, have to be treated with scepticism. The majority of his actions and words he spoke were done for a reason. He possessed a great deal of intelligence but a puzzling personality; therefore, it is difficult to determine why Lyndon Johnson made his choices concerning the Kerner Commission. Johnson's often contradictory actions are evidence of a man who was faced with a series of decisions that, by March 1968, had become impossible for him to manufacture a situation out of that would appease the various factions in American society. The evidence in his interactions with Califano, his neglect of the commission and his call with Daley, all in the first two weeks following the commission's publication, all show that he was a man who believed that he was put in an impossible situation when he was presented with the commission.

Lyndon Johnson left office with regrets. The Vietnam War cost him a great deal; more than anything, it contributed to his fall from grace. However, in civil rights, his most outstanding achievement, Johnson also criticised himself. In his final public speaking engagement, Johnson addressed a civil rights symposium held at the LBJ Library on 12th December 1972. A clearly frail Johnson spoke with great pride about his civil rights accomplishments and hopes for the future. He said of the library's records, those that concerned civil rights were his proudest works, "That holds the most of myself within it."[567] He also admitted his regret, "We haven't done nearly enough, I'm kind of ashamed of myself that I had six years and couldn't do more than I did."[568] Whether Johnson thought about the Kerner Commission's report as he framed those words and spoke about all that still needed to be done is impossible to say. He acknowledged that "the black problem remains what

[567] Lyndon B. Johnson, *Remarks by Former President Lyndon Johnson at a Civil Rights Symposium 12/12/1972,* The LBJ Library, 12th December 1972, Video file Posted 9th February 2013. Remarks by Former President Lyndon Johnson at a Civil Rights Symposium, 12/12/1972. - YouTube. Accessed 17th June 2023.
[568] Ibid.

it has always been: the simple problem of being black in a white society."[569] Johnson admitted that there were divisions in black and white society as the Kerner Commission had done, but it had "not yet been addressed."[570]

Tragically, a month after giving that speech, Lyndon Johnson passed away on 22nd January 1973. His stubbornness and indecisiveness may have impacted his ability to see that the Kerner Report was correct at the time of its publication. At the time of his passing, he knew it had been necessary. His personality and the widespread backlash movement had affected the progress of the commission's stated goals. He had been in one of the most challenging positions of any president in early 1968, so he felt he could not even consider embracing the commission. Johnson tried acknowledging the report weeks later, and his thoughts on the nation's cities came from genuine compassion and concern. He had attempted to fix the cities, improve black Americans' lives, and defeat poverty. However, this was too great a task for one president or even one generation to accomplish. In his view, he received little thanks for his endeavours. When he was handed the Kerner Report, the civil rights and liberalism movements had moved beyond him. For their part, reactionary Republicans would claim the White House and would do so for all but four years until 1993, when Bill Clinton became president. In a 2023 interview given to CNN, America's first black president, Barack Obama, spoke poignantly, "I think race has always been the fault line in American life, in American politics."[571] On either side of that fault line are two societies, one white, one black, separate and unequal. Therefore, it is little wonder that many of the commission's warnings of challenges and obstacles to race relations are still worth considering with humility in 2023.

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[569] Ibid.
[570] Ibid.
[571] Barack Obama. "Obama & Amanpour: The Full World Exclusive Interview," Interview by Christiane Amanpour, *CNN, 23rd June 2023.* *Obama & Amanpour: Obama & Amanpour: The Full World Exclusive Interview | CNNThe Full World Exclusive Interview | CNN*. Accessed 1st July 2023.

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