

Foreword: A Perennial Harvest

Black rage built throughout the middle 1960s as the Civil Rights Movement was met with increasing opposition from whites in the United States. By 1963, terrorism aimed at the Movement was reaching fearful heights, particularly in the South. During the ensuing years in the North, blacks increasingly and militantly demanded access to jobs, housing, basic democratic rights, freedom from police misconduct, and political power—black power—in institutions ranging from local governments to local school systems. They were also met with rising white resistance and increasing violence. Throughout the United States blacks responded to the increasing resistance to their demands for basic rights and racial equality by insisting on self-determination—the right for blacks to organize themselves as they saw best in order to meet the needs of a movement that was transforming from a civil rights to a black liberation movement. Blacks also responded through urban rebellions in city after city during the summer of 1967 and later in the mass insurgency that swept across over 100 cities in the U.S. after the April 4, 1968, assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In response to the urban rebellions in the summer of 1967, a report was prepared—this volume’s “The Harvest of American Racism”—for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders that had been established by President Lyndon Baines Johnson and chaired by Otto Kerner to analyze the cause of, and make policy recommendations with respect to, the urban rebellions that had swept the country with ferocious intensity. “Harvest” was a report prepared by a team of then mostly young social scientists who were far more aggressive than the Commission leadership desired in analytically framing the urban disturbances in part as a manifestation of the increasing *political* militancy of urban black youth. The report’s conclusion starkly argued that the country had two choices: either massive, brutal repression of the black liberation movement, or finally acting to thoroughly address racial inequality—socially, economically, and politically. Their report was rejected by Johnson administration functionaries as being far too radical—politically “unviable.” One of the original researchers later found a copy in an archive with the word “Destroy” stamped on the cover page.

The original report is compelling and provides an alternative framing to the one provided in the Commission's final Kerner Report. Yet also instructive are this book's short memoirs by members of the original team of social scientists. They tell a tale of political suppression by a liberal government unprepared to pay the political and economic cost that would be necessary to realistically address racial inequality within the U.S. There is also, frankly, a slight air of nostalgia in some of the recollections of the days when racial liberals could work from the inside of American power with a hope of achieving real change. Despite having that hope crushed, some still see LBJ as a beacon of racial progress—ignoring that not only did his administration reject their radical if sensible analysis, but that the rejection was infamously due both to his refusal to pay the political cost and to his increasing focus on a doomed imperial war in Indochina. Their recollections do demonstrate that good, honest (if sometimes myopic) social science can play an extremely positive role in fighting racial and other injustice and inequality, but only if it is matched with a powerful political will to implement the findings. That political will has never come from within an American presidential administration; that will has only been forged in black and other radical communities' movements for justice. The political power for change, as incremental as it has been, has come from within those communities. Washington responds, it does not lead.

Kenneth Clark's pathbreaking and iconic *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* was published in 1965. Fifty years later Harvard philosopher Tommie Shelby's *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* was published.¹ In *Dark Ghettos* Shelby looks at the structural and cultural factors that still systemically and structurally produce massive disadvantage in particularly poor black communities. The fact that works such as *Dark Ghettos* are credible half a century later is a predictable consequence of the path the U.S. chose after the mid-1960s. Two elements that "Harvest" argued against were chosen—first by the Johnson administration and then particularly by the Nixon administration. The first strategy utilized (by both Democratic and Republican administrations until the Reagan administration) was tokenism. Partial access to economic and political resources was granted to a small, increasingly elite segment of the black community. As Megan Francis and I have argued elsewhere,² a large proportion of this black elite has embraced a depoliticized black neoliberalism.

1. Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

2. Michael C. Dawson and Megan Ming Francis, "Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order," *Public Culture* 28, no. 1 (2016): 23–62.

The second strategy adopted was the massive repression of the black liberation movement. Black organizations ranging from Civil Rights groups, such as King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense were targeted for infiltration and destruction by government agencies and programs such as COINTELPRO. Leaders of these organizations were targeted for defamation, incarceration, and assassination. The result has been the production of an affluent class of blacks who share substantially if not fully in the benefits affluent Americans enjoy. The majority of blacks reside in disadvantaged black communities that have fragile relationships to labor markets; are often the sites of intolerable environmental ravages; and are bereft of the opportunities that would allow their residents to build flourishing lives.

Today, most black communities and the majority of blacks in the U.S. face worse economic conditions than existed in the mid-1960s, and systemic racial inequality remains a basic and central feature of the contemporary United States. We need to ask what the social structures are that continue to produce stark racial inequality within the polity. A relatively recent line of research on racial capitalism has begun to analyze how the intersection of systemic systems of racial and economic inequality produce disadvantaged black communities. A similarity today with the era of "Harvest," one that we should expect, is that it is once again militant, angry, and organized black youth who are taking up the challenge of fighting not just racial, but all forms of injustice. It appears that the current administration favors the Nixonian response to black demands for justice.

It remains to be seen if in this era, a more fruitful and just alternative will be embraced by sufficient numbers of communities of this country. What is clear is that suppressing honest analysis guarantees disaster. We increasingly see this with respect to the suppression of sound science about climate change. We will only achieve justice and equality in this country if all of us, not just scholars, embrace it as our duty to "speak truth to power."

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"The Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967"
Robert Shellow, Editor
Foreword by Michael C. Dawson
University of Michigan Press, 2018

Introduction

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The summer of 1967 saw a frightening escalation of violence in America's cities. Americans woke up each morning to banner headlines describing the latest urban eruption, and they went to bed reeling from seemingly endless TV images of burning buildings, overturned cars, and rampaging youths. These were not singular events such as the 1965 Watts riot in Los Angeles or other isolated riots in New York or Chicago. This time it seemed like the entire country was on fire and that the anarchy in the inner city might soon spread to more affluent neighborhoods. People were frightened and angry. Because the riots spread quickly from one city to another, the conclusion that they were somehow linked, possibly orchestrated by agitators—perhaps even Russian agents—seemed plausible to many and absolutely incontrovertible to some. It was a heyday for conspiracy theorists and particularly for white supremacists. Generally, however, there was an appetite for suppressive action, almost without regard to what form that might take.

Though hard to fathom today, a total of 164 American cities experienced some level of civil disorder throughout 1967, the majority of which occurred during the summer. By the end of August, the disturbances had claimed 76 lives and caused 1,900 injuries.

It started late in March with a two-day disturbance in Omaha; another lasted two days in Nashville in early April. These were followed by ten disorders spread across the West, Midwest, East, and South. By June disorders of significant size hit Cincinnati, Buffalo, Boston, Atlanta, and Tampa, accompanied by a scattering of lesser-magnitude disturbances throughout the rest of the country. By mid-July a major riot seized Newark and spread to a number of adjacent New Jersey communities. In the final weeks of that month Detroit erupted, and disturbances in a wide cluster of Michigan cities followed suit. Minneapolis and Milwaukee also had riots, as did a scattering of cities in Illi-

nois, Indiana and Ohio. It seemed like it would never stop. But it finally did, petering out in late September.

Thus, after several alarming summer months, it was clear that the problems in the nation's cities were not just local in nature but were somehow linked, a crisis on a national scale, unforeseen and of a scope rarely experienced in recent national history. The administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson quickly assembled a presidential commission to determine the causes and find solutions to the crisis. Johnson asked the commission to address three questions: "What happened?" "Why did it happen?" and "How can we prevent it from happening again?"

Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois was tapped by the president to chair what promised to be a politically sensitive and risky inquiry into what had happened and why. A bipartisan presidential commission, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, was hurriedly convened in July 1967, while Detroit continued to burn. Kerner's vice chairman on the committee was John V. Lindsay, mayor of New York City. Also serving, and providing a diversity of political and occupational perspectives, were senators Fred R. Harris of Oklahoma and Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts; I. W. Abel, president of the United Steelworkers of America; Charles B. Thornton, chairman of Litton Industries; congressmen James C. Corman of California and William M. McCulloch of Ohio; Katherine Graham Peden, commissioner of commerce in Kentucky; and Herbert Jenkins, chief of police in Atlanta.

The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, informally known as the Kerner Report, published on March 1, 1968, is well known. What is much less well known is the report that preceded it, *The Harvest of American Racism: The Political Meaning of Violence in the Summer of 1967*, prepared by a team of social scientists hired by the Commission to try to determine what was driving the violence—why did it happen? While the Kerner Report was widely read and became a best seller, the earlier report, whose interpretation of events differed from that of the final report released by the Commission, is largely unknown, as it was quickly suppressed by top staff directors. As the fiftieth anniversary of the Kerner Report approached, historians have been examining how the *Harvest* may have influenced what the Commission ultimately held and, specifically, how the internal dynamics of the process played out.

The team of social scientists behind the *Harvest* report, consisting of David Boesel, Louis Goldberg, Gary T. Marx, David O. Sears, and myself as research director, culled through the massive data brought back by investigative teams that had fanned out to collect information on site in 23 of the 164 cities. We

delivered a draft of our report to the Kerner Commission's executive director and his deputy on November 22, 1967. Though the report had been anxiously and impatiently anticipated by members of the Commission staff, it was emphatically and angrily suppressed within a few days of its arrival.

There was a major difference between what Commission members were given and accepted as an explanation of the riots and the view of their analytic staff that they were prevented from seeing. The difference lay in the discovery of a political dimension that persistently appeared in a number of disturbances that summer.

The detailed documentation that was being drafted for an appendix was also aborted when the *Harvest* was rejected. The team was in the middle of teasing out the dynamics underlying riot behavior. If completed, that analysis would have made clear that simplistically attributed motivations for the numerous disturbances missed the mark and that it was difficult to explain what had happened with broad generalizations.

The Harvest of American Racism did not see the light of day but instead languished in the LBJ Presidential Library for fifty years. The goal of this book is to make the *Harvest* document public at last and to foster a reexamination of those conclusions that did not make it into the Kerner Commission's final communication to the nation. In addition, the book provides brief recollections of four of *Harvest's* five original authors: David Boesel, Gary T. Marx, David O. Sears, and myself. The assembled recollections describe how the team approached its assignment, its internal deliberations, and the pressures and atmosphere under which the social scientists worked. Further, they suggest the reasons for the suppression of the *Harvest* document.

What about this product generated by disciplined social scientists so alarmed the presidentially appointed directors of the Commission's staff? What methods of analysis and interpretation led them to the *Harvest's* conclusions? What did its authors experience as they labored to produce their stillborn offspring?

As America's cities erupted, one by one, there was great political pressure to come up with explanations and solutions for the widespread civil unrest. From the outset of our research, tension mounted over the time constraints imposed upon the team as they attempted to develop a "social science" version of what caused the riots. Adding to this pressure was an underlying and perhaps fundamental conflict between members of the Kerner Commission's staff leadership, as the lawyers and social science analysts held divergent perspectives on how to approach the search for answers. The conflict lay in underlying assumptions, different methods of treating data, and different ways of

reaching conclusions. The lawyers first set about identifying conclusions that appeared to be most politically viable, and then seeking evidence to support them. They were making a case. The social scientists favored first immersing themselves in data and then seeking to find explanatory patterns. The difference in our two approaches and the Commission's impatience with the perceived slow pace of social science deliberations undoubtedly fueled frustration. They were eager for answers and pushed for a preliminary report that we felt still needed refinement.

Not surprisingly, the executive director's insistent demand for the immediate delivery of the report came as a shock to its authors, who considered the work by no means complete. When it was rejected, we first felt dismay, then anger and disappointment. When we questioned the reason for the rejection of the draft report, the answer came back that it "lacked bottom." That is, the report presumably failed to meet a standard of evidentiary support, not surprisingly, since the report was a preliminary draft, and some of the key events, conditions, demands, expressed attitudes, and so forth on which the text and its conclusions were based had not as yet been tied to their sources. Had the research team been allowed to proceed with the process of backing up each assertion by locating its origin in that vast cache of data, the "bottom" would most likely have become evident and the charge withdrawn. The final report of the Kerner Commission included a compilation of the data on which the *Harvest's* conclusions were based; the data were tallied in 102 pages in Appendix H of the Kerner Commission Report.

So why was the *Harvest* suppressed? At least four commentators have weighed in on the question. In the year following the release of the Kerner Report, political scientists Michael Lipsky and David J. Olson, writing in the journal *TransAction*, concluded:

From all indications, it appears that this draft was rejected for inclusion in the final report not only because its conclusions were radical, but also because documentation for its underlying theory of riot causation was lacking.

Very shortly after the "Harvest" draft was rejected, the commission changed its timetable to eliminate the interim report and released most of the staff, about 100 people. For some staff members, these three events confirmed their suspicions that the commission was exploiting them without respect for their skills and was leaning toward development of a conservative report that was at odds with the staff members' analysis.¹

1. Michael Lipsky and David J. Olson, "Riot Commission Politics," *TransAction*, July/August, 1969.

Several months later, journalist Andrew Kopkind noted:

The firing of 120 staff members in late 1967 was never explained; the substantial hostility of black staffers towards the Commission's own "institutional" racism was never mentioned; the "underground" Commission document, "The Harvest of American Racism," was never examined.

It fell to Palmieri (Deputy Director) to assemble a crew of social scientists to document and analyze the "causes" of the riots, on which (incidentally) everyone had agreed before the Commission's work ever started . . . (that they were) "caused" by "ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs."²

Probably the most imaginative account of what happened was offered by historian Abraham H. Miller:

In reality, the report was the work of hundreds of staffers, largely social scientists whose mind-sets reflected the leftist orthodoxy of the time.

Under the direction of social psychologist Robert Shellow, Johnson's agenda was quickly scrapped for a more radical one. Shellow's staff produced an inflammatory document titled "The Harvest of American Racism." The riots were here transformed into nothing less than a revolutionary uprising. They were glorified as part of a violent struggle that America would continually have to face until there was a major transformation of the African-American community. If the rioters sought legitimacy for their behavior, Shellow's document provided it. Nonetheless, the subsequent Kerner Commission Report was in many ways indistinguishable from the original one.

And in a 2014 blog, he reveals:

The often-cited Kerner Commission Report on the riots of the 1960s began with the working title "The Harvest of American Racism." The original draft was a scathing indictment of white racism as the root cause of riots. Even President Lyndon Johnson, the author of the Great Society and the shepherd of the major civil-rights legislation of that era, was outraged by this first version of the report. He had its director and much of its staff sent packing.³

2. Andrew Kopkind, "White on Black: The Riot Commission and the Rhetoric of Reform," *Hard Times*, September, 1969.

3. Abraham H. Miller, "Myths the Kerner Commission Created," *World&I*, August 1, 2000; and Abraham H. Miller in a blog post, "On the 'Root Cause' of Riots," *National Review*, December 2, 2014.

It has been left to historian Steven M. Gillon to clear up the matter in his historical treatment of the Commission, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism*. Based on his dogged pursuit of all available leads and Commission participants as well as their archived personal papers he came up with a more plausible conclusion, which he summarized in an email to the author just prior to publication:

My conclusions about the impact of Harvest are little different from what you wrote in your article back in 1970. "Social Scientists and Social Action from Within the Establishment," *Journal of Social Issues* (Winter 1970): 207–15. After interviewing many of the surviving players, and reviewing all the relevant documents, I simply confirmed what you said all along. I just had better access to the context then you had back then.

I believe that historians and political scientists have misinterpreted Harvest. They make two claims that are not true.

First, they almost all quote from the last section of the report [Chapter VII, written by Louis Goldberg] and ignore the more sophisticated analysis in the rest of the report. But as you and I have discussed, that last chapter is out of sync with the rest of the report and it has more to do with Goldberg's personal politics (and demons) and less to do with the overall approach of the report.

Second, they argue, and continue to argue that Harvest led to the December purge. The evidence to refute that claim is clear and overwhelming. The firings had nothing to do with the report. No one in the White House ever saw it. Ginsburg did not even show it to the commissioners. Some go so far as to suggest that Ginsburg fired the staff in response to Harvest. The budget cuts were tied to the supplemental request that was due in early December and LBJ's anger toward Lindsay and his belief that the commission had gone astray (and he reached that conclusion without ever seeing Harvest). Ginsburg, Palmieri and John Koskinen were shocked and disappointed by LBJ's decision. So were Joe Califano and Budget director Charles Schultze, who had days before lobbied LBJ to include funding for the commission in the supplemental.⁴

You did not know the details when you wrote your article, but your instincts were right then, as they are now, that Harvest had no impact on the decision to cut the commission's funding.⁵

4. Gillon here refers to David Ginsburg, executive director of the Kerner Commission staff; Mayor John V. Lindsay, vice chairman of the Commission; Victor Palmieri, deputy executive director of Commission staff; Palmieri's assistant, John Koskinen; and Joseph A. Califano, Jr., secretary of the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

5. Personal email from Gillon to Shellow, December 12, 2017.

There was that major difference between what Commission members were given and accepted as an explanation of the riots and the view of their analytic staff that they were prevented from seeing. A difference that would not be easy to reconcile.

The detailed documentation that was being drafted for an appendix was also aborted when the *Harvest* was rejected. An attempt was made to tease out the dynamics underlying riot behavior, an analysis that would have made clear that simplistically attributed motivations missed the mark and that it was difficult to explain what had happened with broad generalizations. Gillon speculated:

Yet had Ginsburg and Palmieri looked beyond Goldberg's incendiary summation, they would have found a report grounded in empirical data, one that made for painful but necessary reading. Bringing the commissioners around to it would still have been a challenge, but it would have been one well worth undertaking.⁶

His research makes clear that the reason *Harvest* was rejected can be found in Ginsburg's attempt to find common ground on which all commissioners could agree, particularly the opposing factions represented by John Lindsay and Fred Harris, on the one hand, and Charles "Tex" Thornton and William McCulloch, on the other. One side was pushing for more federal investment to uplift ghetto residents, while the other sought more support for control of criminal behavior. *Harvest's* suggestion that political processes could be found in some disturbances was not a welcome finding. Ginsburg and Palmieri had a difficult needle to thread.

Realizing the unpredictability of what the social scientists might find, particularly given the enormity of the task, Commission leadership had launched several parallel writing efforts as our team was getting organized. The ostensible strategy was to set in motion several simultaneous competing analytic assignments, seeming to serve as a hedge against the possibility that any might fail. Further examinations of the Commission and its internal workings, such as Gillon's, may tell us whether and how this approach worked.

It is also now clear that even before our team of social scientists were brought on board, before we dove into the mass of data coming back from riot

6. Steven M. Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 169.

cities, and before we took a stab at making sense of it all, top staff directors had already settled pretty much on what the Kerner Report was to say. Now, half a century on, it is time to look at what they could not.

It was while being interviewed for Gillon's book *Separate and Unequal* that the idea to publish *Harvest* was born. The more focused aim of this volume is to report the personal and collective experiences of one small staff unit in carrying out what was freely admitted at the outset to be an "impossible assignment."

A vast amount of information had been and was being collected by the time the team had settled in at the Commission offices on 16th Street, NW. In the pages that follow, the authors describe how their scholarship, research, and personal experience helped them structure their assigned task. They describe how, faced with a tsunami of information, they managed to organize widely divergent data and finally develop a scheme for selecting a sample of disturbances for intensive study.

There was certainly more to the *Harvest* in the six analytic chapters that preceded its strident concluding chapter. In 1972, sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Martin Jaeckel asked me for help in subjecting the *Harvest* report to a meticulous content analysis as they compared it to the final Kerner document. In a book chapter titled "The Uses of Sociology by Presidential Commissions,"⁷ excerpted in an appendix to this volume, they made the following observations:

1. The differences between the social scientists' analysis of the riots and the summary description that was finally adopted by the Commission are rather striking.
2. The authors [of *Harvest*] applied a broad social movement perspective and took a longitudinal approach to the topic.
3. They concluded that an ever-increasing politicization was the central trend in the ghettos as well as in the disorders. Ghetto youth were identified as a potent new social force, blocked from access to political power.
4. [The *Harvest*'s] Authors applied certain distinctions, e.g., the difference between political confrontations and purely expressive rampages, the

7. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Martin Jaeckel, "The Uses of Sociology by Presidential Commissions," in *Sociology and Public Policy: The Case of Presidential Commissions*, ed. Mirra Komarovsky (Elsevier, 1975). See also Martin Jaeckel's PhD dissertation, "The Use of Social Science Knowledge and Research in a Presidential Commission: A Case Study in Utilization," University of Pittsburgh, 1989.

- degree of political content in a disorder, and net assessments of the overall racial attitude of a city's elite.
5. In contrast, the summary produced by the [Commission's] executive staff presents an accurate composite description, an overall profile of the riots as factual events consisting of the enumeration of various component elements of the disorders—physical conditions, kinds of violence, types and extents of damages, characteristics of participants, types of control actions, demographic information on the areas in question, post-riot reactions.
 6. The net result is a cross-sectional array of unrelated ingredients, from which little can be concluded.

Despite these differences, both documents established the indisputable existence of the negative effects of prejudice, discrimination, and neglect and their role in the riots. The Kerner Report made that finding official. It is not at all clear how the principal themes of the *Harvest* analysis would have added to the argument.

While incidents of urban violence and police-community tensions have never reached the fever pitch they did in the summer of 1967, the issues are still with us and confrontations in a number of US cities, large and small, continue to make the nightly news. Tempting though it might be to comment here on the significance and/or the potential impact of the *Harvest*, we decided that to do so would go beyond the purview of this project. Commentary on the essential questions raised by the report, along with a broader evaluation of the Commission's work and the status of interracial relations throughout the past half-century, seem best left to other commentators or to other venues. The contributors to this book do believe, however, that publishing the *Harvest*, even in its incomplete form, can serve to illuminate our understanding of civil violence and collective behavior.