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20 YEARS AFTER THE KERNER REPORT

By David J. Garrow

QUIET RIOTS

Race and Poverty in the United States

Edited by Fred R. Harris & Roger W. Wilkins. Pantheon. 223 pp. \$19.95 (\$9.95, paperback).

THE KERNER REPORT

The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Pantheon. 513 pp. \$8.95 (paperback).

July 1967 witnessed perhaps the two most intense and prolonged urban riots in American history. Twenty-five people were killed in Newark, and, just a few days later, the death toll in Detroit came to 43. President Lyndon Johnson, in part because he falsely believed that some conspiracy of black revolutionaries had triggered the disorders, quickly appointed an 11-member study commission chaired by Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner.

Composed almost exclusively of mainstream liberals -- including New York Mayor John Lindsay, Oklahoma Sen. Fred Harris, Massachusetts Sen. Edward W. Brooke, NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins and progressive Atlanta police chief Herbert Jenkins -- the Kerner Commission, assisted by a sizable professional staff, submitted a lengthy, 17-chapter final report to President Johnson just seven months later. The report, much to Johnson's distaste, pulled no punches in arguing that the real roots of black rioting in America's central cities lay in the race-based economic inequalities that trapped hundreds of thousands of ghetto dwellers in lives of little opportunity or hope. The commission's basic conclusion was stated in one sentence that many Americans may still recall 20 years later: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal."

Now former senator Harris, in conjunction with black journalist Roger Wilkins, has co-edited a book of academic essays assaying the growth -- yes, growth -- of American poverty over these last 20 years, a book whose publication has been paired with a reissuing of the 1968 Kerner Report itself. In their introduction, Harris and Wilkins emphasize that "neither economic progress for some blacks nor increased black political power have made a significant difference for the poor blacks left behind." Indeed, they note, just as University of Chicago sociologist William J. Wilson highlighted a year ago in his vitally important book "The Truly Disadvantaged," "there is a large and growing urban underclass in America -- principally made up of blacks and Hispanics in the central cities. They are more economically isolated, more socially alienated, than ever before."

In his own new introduction to the reissued Kerner Report, Harris observes that "in the 1950s and 1960s, before the era of the riots, it was possible for most middle-class Americans to live without any contact with -- or awareness of -- the realities of urban poverty." Aside from some middle- or upper-class residents of or commuters into America's dozen biggest cities, that

opportunity for widespread ignorance and disinterest is once again quite fully intact, for these last 20 years have witnessed few if any dramatic disorders that would draw public attention to the deteriorating economic conditions in scores of central city neighborhoods. Harris terms the dramatic rises in urban black unemployment, poverty, teen-age pregnancy, drug use and crime "quiet riots," which "are not as noticeable or alarming to outsiders as the violent riots of the 1960s," but emphasizes that "they are more destructive of human life."

As in virtually all edited volumes, the quality of the contributions to the Harris and Wilkins book varies tremendously, with the most valuable efforts coming from University of Chicago political scientist Gary Orfield, longtime journalist John Herbers and professor Wilson. In conjunction with three of his graduate assistants, Wilson extends his argument from "The Truly Disadvantaged" by at least one useful step. Here, as in that commendable book, Wilson stresses that the "dramatic decline in the demand for unskilled or semiskilled labor in goods-producing industries" in our major Northern cities over the last two decades, and the ensuing reduction in decent-wage, entry-level jobs for young black males lie at the core of all that has happened in black center-city neighborhoods since the late 1960s.

Along with that structural transformation of urban economies and the tremendous reduction in blue-collar jobs, Wilson identifies the significant outmigration of many middle- and working-class black families from inner-city neighborhoods as the other most influential development. That outmigration leads not only to a higher concentration of poor people, but also to a weakening of those neighborhoods' indigenous social institutions and of the informal friends and neighbors employment networks through which people oftentimes hear about and obtain jobs. As employment and mobility chances for those left behind decline further, those people's perceptions of their likely economic opportunities are in turn reduced, thus increasing the likelihood that individuals will turn to antisocial and/or self-destructive coping strategies. As Wilson writes, "when the objective probability of achieving a stable and socially rewarding life, symbolized by the presence of stable working- and middle-class families, falls below a certain threshold, high aspirations can Wilson likely means "may well" no longer be maintained and individuals are more likely to 'adjust' to a condition that appears unchangeable and inevitable." Thus Wilson sees an explicitly economic, employment-based explanation for the behavioral or "cultural" traits that have mushroomed in America's ghettos because of how "the adjustment of subjective hopes and expectations to actual chances reinforces the objective mechanisms leading to increased isolation of the underclass."

Wilson is the first to acknowledge that more research is necessary to fully support his analysis, but Wilson's first interest, as with the other contributors to the Harris and Wilkins volume, is to identify politically- plausible policy changes that would tangibly improve the employment prospects and life chances of the urban underclass. Here the arguments in the Harris and Wilkins volume point in two distinctly different but not contradictory directions. First, Wisconsin sociologist Gary Sandefur, just like Wilson in "The Truly Disadvantaged," contends that a blunt emphasis upon how a majority of poor Americans are white, not black, should be the first step toward building a coalition that could push successfully for a new, all-out war on poverty.

Journalist Herbers, however, advances a second and distinctly more promising strategic case. By way of background, he notes how "the South succumbed to racial desegregation not so much

because of federal law but because to do so was considered good for business." In town after town across the South -- Montgomery, Atlanta, Albany, Ga., and Birmingham, to name just several -- the first local whites who became willing to support desegregation initiatives were neither conscience-stricken ministers nor courageous elected officials but downtown business interests who were making cold-eyed judgments about what really was in their own longer-term economic self-interest.

Out of this, Herbers correctly sees a hopeful possible parallel, if present-day business leaders decide "that the urban ghettos should no longer be tolerated because their presence is not good for business." Already Herbers sees some hopeful signs in "a growing realization among both political and business leaders that communities with many poorly educated, destitute people cannot compete for industries and services that demand highly skilled workers." Hence a political coalition featuring joint leadership between true advocates for the black underclass and white corporate interests would be in the clear longer-term economic self-interest of both groups.

Such a strategic possibility for meaningful change is about the only optimistic hope one can draw from the dire portrait of American poverty's 20- year growth painted by the Harris and Wilkins volume. One contributor noted that "the 1968 Kerner report may have been too optimistic in its worst prognosis," and New York Times columnist Tom Wicker, in his own new introduction to the reissued report, observes that "the national desire to act . . . is greatly diminished" in 1988 from what it was in 1968. The only hope is that more and more Americans will soon come to realize, as Harris and Wilkins put it, that "we will all be victims if our nation continues to become a more separated, more unfair, and less stable society."

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