*Research*

# On Riots and Riot Commisions: Civil Disorders in the 1960s

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As a student of collective American violence who served as staff historian for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (Violence Commission) during 1968–1969, I have been increasingly torn during the subsequent dozen years between respect for the work of the major public investigative commissions and dissatisfaction with their ahistorical social scientism. The essay that follows will not resolve that ambivalence—will not, for the most part, attempt to isolate history and the role of historians in the analysis of collective violence in general and in riot commission studies in particular. What I will attempt is a necessary preliminary exercise, a state-of-the-art overview and survey of the literature—especially its theoretical debates—that links the civil disorders of the 1960s and their interpreters, including historians. Given the complexity of the events with which I am dealing in so few pages, I hope I will be forgiven for generalizing broadly. In concluding I will return to my ambivalence and suggest where it should lead.

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We too commonly speak of the 1960s as a decade uniquely "coming apart" in its turmoil, sandwiched between the complacent 1950s and the retreat of the 1970s. But even the unity of its civil commotion disguises three rather distinct phases of collective violence, each centering on different constituencies and impelled by different motives. First came the violence of southern desegregation, bridging 1960–1965; next was the northern ghetto rioting of 1964–1968; finally there was the campus explosion of 1968–1970. The first half-decade produced no major riot commissions, but between 1965 and 1970, such commissions produced four major assessments: the McCone (1965), Kerner (1967), Violence (1969), and Scranton (1970) reports. Ideologically and politically the desegregation violence of 1960–1965 was explained by a national consensus that condemned southern bigotry as a temporary if appalling and internationally embarrassing aberration from American norms of equality and fair play. But the 1965–1970 trauma of nationwide carnage resulted in riot commission blame, with the McCone Commission taking a hard-line conservative view of riffraff rioting, the Kerner Commission countering with a liberal indictment of deeply rooted American racism, the Violence Commission leaning cautiously back toward the moderate right, and the Scranton Commission somewhat surprisingly leaning left again. Our treatment of riots and riot commissions of the later two phases must wait until we deal briefly with the decade's first phase of violence in the desegregating South, where presumably mayhem was indigenous and investigating its causes became a tautology. In that more innocent and more hypocritical era, such public probes of national malaise were perhaps assumed to be unnecessary.

*Southern Violence and the Civil Rights Movement, 1960–1965*

The violence of the 1960s started in the South in response to the civil rights movement, first with the sit-ins of 1960, then with the freedom rides of 1961, the riot-marred integration of Ole Miss in 1962, the Birmingham violence of 1963 and similar events in Selma in 1965. It was characterized by peaceful but aggressive black protest against segregation, white responsive aggression, widespread if uneven police acquiescence and occasional provo-

cation, small and highly localized scale, minimal fatalities and damage to property, and high visibility in the national press and television. The descriptive and analytical literature of the desegregation movement and its turmoil is voluminous,[1] as is the historic and social science literature on southern tendencies toward violence.[2] But oddly enough, the discrete analyses of southern politics and southern violence have not been theoretically and empirically connected in the extant literature, at least not beyond the vague notion that demagogic politics and "hell of a fellow" violence were symbiotic—that V. O. Key and W. J. Cash were basically talking about two sides of the same coin. Maybe we should have had a riot commission on southern violence in the early 1960s, although at the time it likely would have been seriously flawed by the contemporary pieties. Lacking this, what we do have is a recent study that links civil rights protest and southern violence in a controversial new way.

The book is David J. Garrow's *Protest at Selma*,[3] and it functions as a one-man riot study in linking politics and violence through social science theory. Previously, a commonplace analysis of the success of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s held that Martin Luthern King and his allies remained consistent in their commitment to Christian and Ghandian nonviolent persuasion (as first enunciated by King in 1958 in *Stride Toward Freedom*), but that eventually and inadvertently, King found powerful if ironical allies in the unpersuaded and unreconstructed Eugene "Bull" Connor in Birmingham in 1963 and Sheriff Jim Clark in Selma in 1965. According to this view, the national revulsion which resulted from televised southern police violence led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Garrow denies only the first part of this interpretation, and sees

1. For a comprehensive bibliographical essay on the literature covering the southern response to desegregation, see Numan V. Bartley and Hugh Davis Graham, *Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 214–26.

2. See Sheldon Hackney, "Southern Violence," *American Historical Review*, LXXIV (February, 1969), 906–25.

3. Subtitled *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978). Garrow's book is all the more remarkable in that it originated as a senior honors thesis at Wesleyan and was published while Garrow was a graduate student in political science at Duke.

instead an evolution on the part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) from nonviolent persuasion to nonviolent *coercion* that was *consciously* designed to *provoke* violent white countermeasures that television and the press would translate into irresistible pressure for federal civil rights laws. Thus King's campaign of nonviolent persuasion in Albany, Georgia, in 1962 was an embarrassing flop. This was partly because Police Chief Laurie Pritchett was too shrewdly civil in arresting the protestors. But mostly it was because Christian nonviolent persuasion in the Deep South was psychologically doomed by a white racism that would not yield. So a chastened King went shopping for more trigger-happy lawmen, and found them in the obliging Connor and Clark.

Beyond this suggestive and highly intriguing sequential description, Garrow of course must have a theory and supportive evidence in order to convince us. His theory hinges on E. E. Schattschneider's emphasis on the determining role of third-party audiences in the "socialization" or strategic broadening of two-party conflict.[4] The news media, or "fourth estate," then becomes the crucial fourth party in a quadripartite model of social conflict that Garrow applies to the protest at Selma. According to this model, the media transformed King's locally outnumbered protestors into an overwhelming national majority. Garrow thereby shares the tendency of a clear majority of his social science colleagues within the past decade either to reject or to revise the battered pluralist model of American politics. The pluralist view, which became dominant in the conservative 1950s, emphasizes procedural consensus on the rules of the game, a plurality of elites and multiple centers of power, open access to the intermediating group basis of political competition, and generally practical and centrist bargaining, compromise, and mutual backscratching.[5]

4. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960). Garrow also leans heavily on Harvey Seifert, *Conquest Through Suffering* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965); Michael Lipsky, "Protest as a Political Resource," *American Political Science Review* 62 (December 1968), 1144–58; and Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969).

5. The standard explication of pluralist theory is Robert Dahl, *Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consent* (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1967). A standard critique from the left is Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1969).

Critics on the left have argued that pluralism is inherently conservative, and that it is less a comprehensive theory than a normative description of the elitist power brokerage of America in the 1950s, when only the powerful established political groups could bargain for incremental change. I allude to this ongoing theoretical dispute now partly in deference to Garrow's bold book (and much more detailed and sophisticated theoretical explication), but also because it will be central to the dispute over the meaning of urban riots that we shall turn to shortly.

But if Garrow's theory is plausible, his evidence is basically circumstantial. It concentrates on such externalities as the tactics of the SCLC, the reaction of King's opponents, the behavior of the news media, the response of the President and Congress, the speeches and writings of the protestors, and a massive body of secondary literature (his book contains no bibliography, but has 90 pages of discursive footnotes). His is basically an impressive argument by inference, but historians must await what remains denied: access to the primary documents of King and the SCLC. (To expect access to those of the SNCC is surely to await the impossible, beyond the crucial revelations of oral history.) But in the mid-to-late 1960s the new theoretical challenges to pluralism, which sought to account for the emergence of new protesting groups that had previously been unrepresented in pluralist group bargaining, would be tested by the waves of ghetto rioting that began with the long hot summer of 1964.

*Northern Urban Riots, 1964–1968*

Nineteen-sixty-four represented the transition from southern civil rights violence to northern ghetto riots. The South faced the tensions of Freedom Summer, which was marred by the murder of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi, but was also marked by President Johnson's triumphant signing of the Civil Rights Bill on July 2, the same day it passed Congress. Two weeks later, police violence triggered an outbreak of black rioting in Harlem that quickly spread to Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, and in one week left one dead, more than one hundred injured, nearly five hundred arrested, and millions of dollars worth of property destroyed. Similar outbreaks followed shortly in Rochester, Phila-

delphia, and several smaller northeastern cities. The following summer attention was focused on the Watts ghetto in Los Angeles, which erupted leaving 34 dead, over a thousand injured, nearly four thousand arrested, and tens of millions of dollars worth of property damages. During the summer of 1966 rioting returned to the pattern of 1964; no one city dominated, but a multiplicity of black communities exploded: Chicago, Cleveland, Dayton, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Omaha. Then 1967 combined the pattern, with such virgin riot cities as Boston, Nashville, Cincinnati, Newark, and Milwaukee being joined by Detroit, where a mega-riot resulting in 43 deaths, 7,200 arrests, and fifty million dollars in property damage broke all the records since the New York Draft Riot of 1863. In 1968 came the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and in response the burning and looting of Washington, Baltimore, Chicago, and a hundred smaller cities. By one count, the 1964–1968 period produced 329 important riots in 257 cities, with 52,629 persons being arrested for riot-related offenses, 8,371 injured, and 220 killed—mostly black civilians.[6] Thereafter the summers quieted,[7] and the extraordinary urban riots of 1964–1968 demanded explanation. In response, government executives appointed riot commissions, which in turn created controversy over (a) their substantive explanations of the rioting and their consequent recommendations, and (b) the procedural phenomenon of riot commissions themselves.

*Storm Over the Riot Commissions*

Turning first to the procedural question of the role and utility of ad hoc governmental commissions, the traditional cynicism toward them was fueled early in the 1960s by widespread criticism of the narrow conclusions of the Warren Commission—i.e., that Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone killed President Kennedy.

6. Bryan T. Downes, "A Critical Reexamination of the Social and Political Characteristics of Riot Cities," *Social Science Quarterly* 51 (September 1970), 349–60. The Downes figures are more conservative than those compiled by the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis, but both agree that 1967 was the peak year of collective violence, during which, according to the Lemberg data, 18,800 persons were arrested, 3,400 injured, and 82 killed.

7. The rapid decline in urban rioting since 1968 is disputed in Jane A. Baskin et al., *Race Related Civil Disorders: 1967–69* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 1971); and Joe R. Reagin and Harlan Hahn, *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities* (New York: MacMillan, 1973).

Then came successive controversies over commission explanations of the Watts riot (McCone Commission), the Detroit and related riots (Kerner Commission), the post-assassination riots of 1968 (Violence Commission), and the late 1960s campus turmoil (Scranton Commission)—about which more will be said later. Out of this background has come a literature of cynicism about commission inquiries that has been dominated by a leftist conviction that executives select safely conservative or co-opted blue-ribbon elites to disguise inactivity with the sham appearance of investigative action.[8] But this mood of contempt has been ironically shared by rightist critics, whose bitterness at such runaway vehicles as Truman's Commission on Civil Rights has reinforced normal conservative complaints about wasting taxpayers' dollars.[9] Added to this has been a consensual if nonideological journalistic distaste for the politicians, lawyers, bureaucrats, and social science professors who typically form the commissions' line and staff.[10] In the high British tradition of Gilbert and Sullivan, *Punch* observed of Royal Commissions in iambic quatrameter:

> If you're pestered by critics and hounded by faction
> To take some precipitate, positive action,
> The proper procedure, to take my advice, is
> Appoint a commission to stave off the crisis.[11]

Fortunately, if less cute and cynically appealing, a modest body of scholarship exists that assesses the commission function with-

8. Typical of the critique from the left is Michael Lipsky and David J. Olson, *Commission Politics: The Processing of Racial Crisis in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1977), which, like the Kerner Commission, concentrates on the peak year of 1967, and regards riot commissions as the apotheosis of establishment pluralism. A similar spirit informs Anthony Platt (ed.), *The Politics of Riot Commissions 1917–1970* (New York: Collier, 1971), which is a collection of excerpted commission reports ambushed by critical essays.

9. I have not discovered an equivalent body of "scholarship" by anti-commission conservatives, whose complaints are more customarily aired in newspaper editorials and columns.

10. A superior example is Elizabeth Drew, "On Giving Oneself a Hotfoot: Government by Commission," *The Atlantic* 221 (May 1968), 45–49. See also Daniel Bell, "Government by Commission," *The Public Interest* No. 3 (Spring 1966), 3–9, which probes President Johnson's appointment and subsequent burial of the National Commission on Technology, Automation, and Economic Progress because it recommended that the federal government become an employer of last resort.

11. From Geoffrey Parsons, "Royal Commissions," *Punch*, August 24, 1955, quoted in Harold Seidman, *Politics, Position, and Power: The Dynamics of Federal Organization* (New York: Oxford, 1970), 23.

out obvious ideological preconceptions.[12] Most notable is Thomas R. Wolanin's *Presidential Advisory Commissions,* which studies the behavior of 99 presidential commissions created between the beginning of the Truman administration and the end of the first term of the Nixon administration.[13] Wolanin's conclusions are strikingly similar to those supporting the investigative task force device—that is, that such ad hoc commissions provide bureaucratic entrepreneurs with leverage for policy innovation, that they were genuinely independent and had significant impact both as educational forums for the general public and as policy directives that produced congressional and presidential implementation. Typical of his 99 commission agendas were relatively low-profile policy questions on airport and highway safety, water resources, narcotics and drug abuse, patent and copyright law, and the like. Commission reports on such topics tended to blast policy free of the subcommittee-interest group hammerlock; more often than not, the recommendations of such reports were implemented. But *un*typical were such "crisis-induced" and therefore high-profile national commissions as the Kerner (1967–68), Violence (1968–69), and Campus Unrest (1970) inquiries, where questions of social policy were so vast that the presidential response could only disappoint. Wolanin argues that presidential resistance to such policy initiatives has been exaggerated, and that their usefulness as "public educators" has been overlooked. But he nevertheless concludes that presidents should avoid crisis-induced commissions because of the political reality that there is so little that presidents can effectively do about the problems they address.

### *The McCone Commission and the "Riffraff Theory"*

Chronologically, the first major commission to study the 1960s race riots was not presidential but gubernatorial: California Governor Ronald Reagan's Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots (otherwise known as the McCone Commission, after

12. The standard historical study is Carl M. Marcy, *Presidential Commissions* (Morningside Heights, N.J.: King's Crown Press, 1945), which covers the period 1900–1940. See also Frank Popper, *The President's Commissions* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1970).

13. Subtitled *Truman to Nixon* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), this balanced study began in 1972 as a Harvard Ph.D. dissertation in political science.

its chairman, John A. McCone).[14] The McCone Report seems quaintly archaic in its reference to Negro and Caucasian populations, but it has been so savaged by critics that it is in danger of always being disparagingly referred to but never read. Therefore, it has been unfairly robbed of its early acknowledgement of the typicality in Los Angeles of black frustrations about unemployment, poor schools and police abuse, as well as the atypicality of the city's deplorable public transportation and (the critics have largely avoided this comparison) the relative quietude of the depressed but huge Mexican-American population. Nevertheless, and deservedly, the McCone report has come to represent the apotheosis of the conservative view, or the "riffraff theory." This holds that (1) only a tiny fraction of the black population participated in the riots; (2) these were exceptional riffraff elements (unattached, juvenile, unskilled, unemployed, uprooted emigrants from the South, and criminal outside agitators of left-wing or black nationalist persuasion); and (3) the overwhelming black majority in Watts deplored the riots.[15]

*Counterattack of the Kerner Report*

Thus far the riffraff theory appears not to have stood the light of evidence. Its primary critic, at least insofar as the McCone Report is concerned, has been historian Robert Fogelson, whose book *Violence as Protest* is representative of the younger cohort of liberal-to-radical academic dissenters who basically sympathized with the rioters.[16] These critics found their major forum for

14. Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, *Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning? A Report by the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots* (Los Angeles: College Book Store, 1965). Similar local riot commissions were appointed by the mayors of Chicago and Pittsburgh, and specialized commissions were established to investgate the response of the judicial systems in Baltimore, Cincinnati, New York, and Washington, D.C.

15. The most sophisticated statement of this conservative view is Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968).

16. Robert M. Fogelson, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971). Fogelson's dissent was early registered in "White on Black: A Critique of the McCone Commission Report on the Los Angeles Riots," *Political Science Quarterly* LXXXII, 3 (September 1967), 337–67. See also Robert Fogelson and Robert B. Hill, "Who Riots? A Study of Participation in the 1967 Riots," *Supplemental Studies for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 221–48; Feagin and Hahn, *Ghetto Riots*; and Herbert Hirsch and David C. Perry (eds.), *Violence as Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

riposte in the Report of the *National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (the Kerner Commission) in the spring of 1968.[17] The Kerner Report's controversial basic conclusion, that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal," clearly irritated President Johnson by implying that the Great Society programs had not made much of a dent in the urban problem, and it infuriated conservatives by blaming not the rioters and looters and snipers but their targets: "White society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." But the Kerner Report and its supplemental studies, and the Skolnick Report to the Violence Commission,[18] strongly reinforced the sympathetic liberal understanding of the black riots. They were described as spontaneous, unorganized, opposed by whites and moderate blacks ("counterrioters" in the argot of the Kerner Commission), confined to the ghettos, and quelled with vigor but not without restraint (with poorest marks going to the poorly trained, over-gunned and trigger-happy National Guard, which did most of the killing). The typical rioter was a young black male. Unskilled and underemployed, he was also a typical local resident (possessing a typical arrest record) rather than a southern emigrant or outside agitator. His targets were police and symbolic white property. As Morris Janowitz observed, the "communal" riots of the early 20th century, which featured white aggression against black territorial encroachment—often amid wartime tension—had given way to the "commodity" riots of the postwar period, which featured black aggression against white property.[19]

Most important, the riots were viewed fundamentally as acts of *political* protest by angry ghetto blacks.[20] Contrary to the con-

17. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968).

18. Jerome Skolnick, *The Politics of Protest: Violent Aspects of Protest and Confrontation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969).

19. Morris Janowitz, *Social Control of Escalated Riots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Center for Political Study, 1968); and Janowitz, "Patterns of Collective Violence," in Graham and Gurr (eds.), *Violence in America,* chapter 10.

20. See Fogelson, *Violence as Protest*; Feagin and Hahn, *Ghetto Revolts*; Skolnick, *The Politics of Protest*; Robert H. Connery (ed.), *Urban Riots: Violence and Social Change* (New York: Academy of Political Science, 1968). For historical analysis, see Charles Tilly, "Collective Violence in European Perspective," in Graham and Gurr (eds.), *Violence in America,* chapter 1; Richard Hofstadter's

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servative riffraff theory, the rioters and looters seemed to be fairly representative local residents who found broad sympathy among their neighbors. But also contrary to the radical anticolonial metaphor, they were not revolutionaries. Rather, they were protestors seeking access to the polity and the consumer good life so celebrated on television. This understanding of collective violence as basically a political act of protest by the powerless represents the overturning of an older view, one consonent with the consensus 1950s and pluralist theory's dismissal of ideology. Pluralism viewed the behavior of mass society in social-psychological terms of anomic pathology, like suicide and crime, which reflected the failure of the uprooted and alienated to adjust to rapid social change.[21] This theory of collective behavior reaches back to Durkheim's conception of *anomie*. It has served many masters, ranging from the conservative Gustave LeBon, who deplored the mob mentality of the lower orders, through the classical liberal anti-authoritarianism of Theodore Adorno and Eric Fromm, to the philosopher-prophet-longshoreman Eric Hoffer, who was appointed by President Johnson to the Violence Commission, and who made a career of rewriting essentially the same book, *The True Believer,* under many different titles, always inviting us to conclude that virtually all revolutionaries are pathologically deranged.

But I have written about all this ideological and theoretical warfare elsewhere,[22] as have many others.[23] Here I want to turn briefly from the politics of social interpretation to the related

introduction to Hofstadter and Michael Wallace (eds.), *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Knopf, 1970); Michael Wallace, "The Uses of Violence in American History," *The American Scholar,* 41 (Winter, 1970–71), 81–102; and Hugh Davis Graham, "The Paradox of American Violence: A Historical Commentary," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 391 (September 1970), 74–82.

21. An illuminating exchange is Elliott Currie and Jerome H. Skolnick, "A Critical Note on Conceptions of Collective Behavior," and Neil J. Smelser, "Two Critics in Search of a Bias: A Response to Currie and Skolnick," in *The Annals* (September 1970), 34–55. See also Charles Tilly, "Revolutions and Collective Violence," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (eds.), *Macropolitical Theory* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 483–555.

22. Hugh Davis Graham, "The Paradox of American Violence," in Graham and Gurr, rev. ed., *Violence in America* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979), chapter 19.

23. A superior empirical study, which discusses the theoretical literature on collective behavior while analyzing the American historical literature, is William A. Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey, 1975).

politics of riot commission appointments, for the very independence of commission inquiry that Wolanin affirms can boomerang on the appointing president. This is precisely what happened to President Johnson, who deeply resented the Kerner Report, yet who promptly appointed still another riot commission. The internal politics of this process, documented in the Lyndon Johnson Library, reveal a fascinating and customarily hidden evolution of riot commission dynamics.[24]

*Lyndon Johnson and the Kerner Commission*

President Johnson appointed the eleven-member Kerner Commission on July 27, 1967, while the fires in Detroit were still raging. In hindsight this haste seems ill-advised, and even at the time senior White House aide Douglass Cater presciently warned Johnson that "there will be a danger [the commission] may try to brainstorm big new programs of its own."[25] Yet the new commission seemed classically balanced in a safely moderate configuration—as aide Harry McPherson was later to reconstruct it:

> The President appointed a commission chaired by the only big state Northern Democratic Governor, and including the Mayor of New York, moderate Negro leaders, responsible Senators and Congressmen, and even for God's sake the police chief of Atlanta. Its staff was run by a brilliant lawyer, known to be an intimate friend and counselor of the President.[26]

But as early as August, 1967, commission hearings reflected hypersensitivity to being "railroaded" or to being used as a "rubber stamp" for the administration.[27] Testimony by angry ghetto blacks during the fall hearings seemed to radicalize the commission, and by January 1968 it was clear both to the White House and to the media that neither Johnson nor Chairman Otto Kerner nor staff director David Ginsburg could control the runaway commission,

24. The brief discussion that follows of Johnson's relationship with the Kerner and Violence commissions is based upon extensive but as yet incomplete research in the Johnson archives. Its highlights are summarized here with minimal reference to the primary documents.

25. Memo, Douglass Cater to President, 7/28/67, Confidential Files (CF) FG690, White House Central Files (WHCF), LBJ Library.

26. Memo, Harry McPherson to Joseph Califano, 3/1/67, CF FG 690, WHCF, LBJ Library. The staff chief was Executive Director David Ginsburg.

27. Memo, Fred Bohen to Califano, 8/24/67, EX FG 686, WHCF, LBJ Library.

whereon a militant majority led by John Lindsay was declaring a state of war to exist in the cities, demanding a $50 billion rebuilding program, and leaning toward renouncing the Vietnam war to pay for it.[28] By late February, 1968, Johnson was berating Califano with telegrams from the LBJ Ranch. Why, he asked, had he "been seeing on the wire and hearing on the radio all day long what the Commission on Civil Disorders is going to report to [him]."[29] Embittered by the Kerner Report's failure to acknowledge the Great Society's contributions and to explain how its radical and massive rebuilding program was to be funded, Johnson ignored his senior aides' pleas that he at least strategically deflect the report and extend the customary formal thanks to the commissioners.[30]

*Lyndon Johnson and the Violence Commission*

In April of 1968 Martin Luther King was killed, and the cities (this time including Washington), burned again. In June, Robert Kennedy fell. President Johnson, by then a self-announced lame duck, appointed yet another commission, and the White House Central Files in Austin testify to his extreme concern to guard against a runaway panel.[31] But the best testimony on the carefully hedged membership of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence comes from the restricted oral history interview (with historian Joseph Frantz), of chairman Milton Eisenhower:

> But here I must say one critical thing of President Johnson. He selected the thirteen members of the commission and he selected the Executive Director, Lloyd Cutler, though he got my permission for the Executive Director. But as I looked over the members of the commission and their talents, I felt that we ought to improve the intellectual level. So I formally asked through the formal White House staff, Califano, that the President appoint Professor James Q. Wilson, the famous

28. Memo, Irvin Sprague to Barefoot Sanders, 1/15/68 EX FG 690, WHCF, LBJ Library.

29. Telegram, Lyndon Johnson to Califano, 2/26/68 EX FG 690, WHCF, LBJ Library.

30. Memo, Califano to President, 2/28/68, 3/2/68, 3/10/68, 3/30/68, EX FG 690, WHCF, LBJ Library.

31. Memo, Califano to President, 6/7/68, 6/10/68, 6/13/68, EX FG 795, WHCF, LBJ Library. Memo, George Reedy to President, 6/26/68, EX FG 795, WHCF, LBJ Library.

political scientist who has devoted most of his professional life to a study of this field and Robert Goheen, President of Princeton University, to the commission and he wouldn't do it.

Since I can later require that this be confidential let me say that it's not been a terribly happy experience. The President wanted some Republicans and some Democrats on the Committee. He wanted two Senators, two Congressmen. He wanted some geographic distribution. He wanted several black members. And he wanted a couple cronies he could absolutely depend upon keeping him informed what this group was doing. Well, the consequence is that the creative thinking is done by about six out of the thirteen. Some of the others don't do their homework at all. Of the four congressional members one Senator—a Democrat—is great; the Republican is never there; the Republican Congressman is great; and the Democrat is never there from the House. So—[32]

The Violence Commission labored for twenty-one months, and its final report was not delivered until December 1969, when Richard Nixon had been in the White House for almost a year.[33] Unlike the Kerner Report's one-sided thrust for more radical reform, the Violence Commission's recommendations called for a carrot-and-stick balance of more social amelioration and more social control. National priorities were to be reordered and $20 billion spent when the Vietnam war was "concluded" (the funding to be derived from consequent defense savings and tax revenues from

32. Transcript, Milton Eisenhower Oral History Interview, 9/5/69, p. 33, LBJ Library.

33. The Violence Commission's final report was upstaged by the previous release of 13 volumes of reports to the commission by its seven task forces, especially the first task force, on historical and comparative perspectives, and the second, on the politics of protest. These reports, which were widely reprinted in paperbound editions because their copyrights were in the public domain, are Graham and Gurr (eds.), *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives,* and Jerome Skolnick, *The Politics of Protest: Violent Aspects of Protest and Confrontation,* both originally published by the U.S. Government Printing Office in 1969. The other volumes were: Donald J. Mulvihill and Melvin Turvin (eds.), *Crimes of Violence;* James F. Kirkham, Sheldon G. Levy, and William J. Crotty (eds.), *Assassination and Political Violence;* George D. Newton, Jr. (ed.), *Firearms and Violence in American Life;* Robert K. Baker and Sandra J. Ball (eds.), *Mass Media and Violence;* James S. Campbell, Joseph R. Sahid, and David P. Stang (eds.), *Law and Order Reconsidered.* In addition, a seventh task force on special investigations produced the following studies: Daniel Walker (ed.), *Rights in Conflict,* on the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago; Louis J. Hector and Paul L. E. Holliwell (eds.), *Miami Report;* Louis H. Masotti and Jerome R. Corsi (eds.), *Shoot-out in Cleveland;* Joseph R. Sahid, *Rights in Concord,* on the counter-Inaugural protest; and William H. Orrick, Jr. (ed.), *Shut It Down! A College in Crisis,* on San Francisco State.

GNP growth). The federal government was to guarantee a basic income floor, and encourage the equalization of metropolitan social services, but was also to assist in the modernizing and strengthening of police forces and the restrictive licensing of concealable handguns (the gun control question, together with civil disobedience, prompted numerous dissenting statements). Such commission recommendations, like presidential platforms, are laboriously arrived at and then customarily ignored, and the report of the Violence Commission was no exception. But the report's chapter on campus disorder, its call for draft reform and for the nationwide enfranchisement of 18-year-olds, as well as the commission's lengthy hearings and publications on student unrest, all signified a major shift in the locus, constituency, and triggering issues of collective violence from the black ghettos to the white middle-class campuses.

*Campus Turmoil, 1968–1970*

The Free Speech Movement at Berkeley began in 1964 as a student-rights spinoff of the civil rights movement, but campus protest did not seriously surge nationwide until 1968, when both the Vietnam war and the draft escalated within the political context of a presidential contest in which all three major contenders were relatively hawkish on the war. Between January 1 and June 15, 1968, the National Student Association counted 221 major protests at 101 colleges and universities involving nearly forty thousand students. By far the most violent of these was the April sacking of Columbia, where about 700 students were arrested and 150 injured. By the late spring of 1970, when President Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia, the student protests and resultant National Guard and police killings at Kent State in Ohio and Jackson State in Mississippi sparked a wave of antiwar demonstrations that by the 10th of May had involved approximately 500 campuses. By the end of May the invasion of Cambodia had sparked protests at approximately a third of the nation's 2,500 colleges and universities.

*Richard Nixon and the Scranton Commission*

One of the Nixon administration's responses was, not surprisingly, to appoint a commission, this one chaired by former Pennsyl-

vania governor William Scranton, a Republican. But the profile of President Nixon's riot commission *was* something of a surprise. Compared to previous commissions, it was younger, blacker, contained fewer lawyers and substantially more university representatives. Its youngest member, 22 year-old Joseph Rhodes, was a black junior fellow at Harvard. The commission's brief report was produced in an astonishing three months.[34] Since the Nixon papers are not available for research, and likely will not be until 1985 at the earliest, we have no documentary evidence to reveal why Nixon appointed such a commission. But the report itself, while predictably condemning student violence, was strikingly sympathetic to the protest goals of the nonradical and nonviolent student majority, and concluded that "nothing is more important than an end to the war in Indochina."

The Scranton Commission was a meteor, flaring in controversy as Vice President Agnew demanded the resignation of Rhodes and denounced the report as "imprecise, contradictory and equivocal" and "more pablum for the permissivists."[35] Nixon essentially ignored it, and left on a tour of European cities. It is unfortunate that the Scranton Report's initial glare of publicity was eclipsed by the death of Nasser and heated congressional elections, for its brief analysis is remarkably balanced and informed in light of the brutal time constraints and the passions of the day. Though lacking the time to sponsor its own research, the commission also had little need to do so, since by 1970 the academic community had generated a massive body of literature about itself; the Scranton Report contains an annotated bibliography of 189 titles that provides a convenient guide to the social analysis of the youth culture and campus unrest circa 1970.

### *The Historical Sociology of the Youth Culture*

The literature on the student movement of the 1960s is so massive and controversial that no reasonable attempt can be made to summarize it here,[36] beyond sketching three broad generalizations

34. *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970).

35. See Platt, *Politics of Riot Commissions*, 475–527.

36. A good bibliographical beginning is Seymour Martin Lipset, *Rebellion in the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), which contains 30 pages of citations. See especially the bibliographical compilations of Philip G. Altbach, below.

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that seem consensual. First, as historians have long known, student protest is as old as the medieval university itself, or (in America) the colonial academy. But the historic tradition of campus turmoil and violence has been generally apolitical, featuring instead food riots and similar protests against primitive living conditions and harsh regulations, or town-gown riots.[37] On the other hand, the cultural and political student protests of the 1920s and 1930s were more organized and modern in appearance, yet were seldom violent. And during the 1940s and 1950s the campuses were unusually quiet on all counts. Hence the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley during 1964–1965, in what the Scranton Report called the "Berkeley Invention," combined some old traditions with some radically new ingredients.[38]

Second, what made the 1960s unique was a volatile combination of exploding demographic trends, the socialization of adolescents on a campus island, and three newly dominant sociopolitical issues. Demographically, the million students and eighty thousand faculty of 1930 had grown by 1970 to seven million students and a half million faculty. Furthermore, the artificial environment into which these students were thrust maximized their possibilities for mobilization in a cause:

> Elements inherent in the marginal status of youth and students, the lesser commitment to authority demanded of sociological adolescents, freedom to sow "wild oats," the socialization of young people into the idealism of the adult group to which they belong, and the relative ease with which those on campus can be reached and mobilized, all make students more likely than any other stratum to respond to events which undermine a social system.[39]

Finally, the activist students found their triggering cluster of issues, first in the civil rights movement and its model of civil disobedience, then in the Vietnam war and its morally and personally threatening draft, and finally (and especially for the radi-

37. For a historical analysis of student protest and violence that honors its complexity more than my generalization in the text, see Seymour Martin Lipset and Gerald M. Schaflander, *Passion and Politics: Student Activism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 124–96.

38. Scranton Report, 22–35; S. M. Lipset and Sheldon S. Wolin (eds.), *The Berkeley Student Revolt* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965); Michael V. Miller and Susan Gilmore (eds.), *Revolution at Berkeley* (New York: Dial, 1965).

39. Lipset, *Passion and Politics*, xiii.

cals), in the university itself.[40] Yet too much can be made of the uniqueness of "the Movement" in America, for it was indubitably an international phenomenon, one not requiring triggering by a civil rights movement or a Vietnam war draft.[41]

Third, this was, in America, a movement of privileged upper and middle class white students, not of blacks or of poor or blue collar whites.[42] Student radicals seized leadership and sought with some success to politicize and radicalize the campus, often with cynical candor—witness Mark Rudd's open contempt for the local galvanizing issues at Columbia in 1968.[43] But the radicals were always a minority even on the most tumultuous campuses, and while in crisis they were skilled at rallying and radicalizing the uncommitted, they were so isolated from and out of step with moderate-to-conservative public opinion nationally that their talk of revolution appears ludicrous. This has invited the contemptuous observation of historian Irwin Unger that they were "revolutionaries manqué" of "puerile irresponsibility,"[44] and of historian William O'Neill that the SDS call for participatory democracy was "the functional equivalent of anarchism."[45] A major source of the unpopularity of campus radicals was that they combined shrill and often violent political radicalism with the counter-culture retreat into drugs, rock music and hippie affectations.[46] This has made it doubly hard to be fair to them, not only for the general public, but also for the university professors who were threatened

40. A representative anthology is Julian Foster and Durward Long, *Protest! Student Activism in America* (New York: Morrow, 1970).

41. Philip G. Altbach, *A Select Bibliography on Students, Politics and Higher Education* (Cambridge: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1967); S. M. Lipset and P. G. Altbach (eds.), *Students in Revolt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969); Lipset (ed.), *Student Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1967); Donald Emerson (ed.), *Students and Politics in Developing Countries* (New York: Praeger, 1968); Julian Nagel (ed.), *Student Power* (London: Merlin, 1969); Joseph A. Califano, Jr., *The Student Revolution: A Global Confrontation* (New York: Norton, 1970).

42. Kenneth Keniston, *Young Radicals* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968); and Richard Flacks, "Who Protests: The Social Bases of the Student Movement," in Foster and Long, *Protest*, 134–57.

43. See Lipset's introduction to *Rebellion in the University*, xx-xxiii.

44. Irwin Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959–1972* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), which is a disappointing and hostile primer from the pen of a Pulitzer laureate.

45. William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart* (New York: Quadrangle, 1971), is a refreshingly irreverent but also cynical editorial on the follies of the 1960s.

46. See Theodore Rosak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969).

by them and also write books about them.[47] Looking forward, the Movement's degeneration into terrorist Weathermen and the counterculture's slide toward psychedelic trips and oriental mysticism tended to damn them in the quiescent 1970s, much as looking backward with Lewis Feuer's controversial historical and comparative analysis has condemned their irrational and self-destructive, intergenerational tendencies toward "elitism, suicidalism, populism, filiarchy, and juvenocracy."[48]

So despite the sea of books on the 1960s violence and youth, the Movement, the counter-culture, and the radicals and the hippies, our perspective is too close to have sorted much of this out—especially since quickie social science always beats reflective history to the publishing houses. Because of the tumultuous 1960s we know more about the history of universities and of student protest,[49] and we know a great deal about the commotion surrounding the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley (which wasn't very violent anyway). We know less about the connections between the ghetto riots of 1964–1968 and the campus violence of 1968–1970, although the Violence and Scranton commissions have helped at least to describe the latter phenomenon. Nor are we sure why the campus violence tailed off so quickly after 1970, or, for that matter, why the ghetto rioting ebbed so rapidly after 1968. These are large substantive problems for another day, since the tailing off of violence does not generate riot commissions.

*Riots, Riot Commissions, and the Historian*

This essay began with the confession of my ambivalence, as a historian, toward the riot commissions, an ambivalence which trades off an appreciation of their public educational value against my complaints about their "ahistorical social scientism." Perhaps my positive feelings should be heavily discounted, as owing too much to the immodesty and bias of personal involvement. Clearly Thomas Wolanin was right in discounting the policy impact of "crisis-induced" commissions, as Kenneth Clark reminded us when he complained in testimony before the Kerner Commission

47. A typical and thoughtful opposing view is Nathan Glazer, *Remembering the Answers* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

48. Lewis S. Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), viii.

49. See, for example, Altbach, *Student Politics in America: A Historical Analysis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

that "it is a kind of Alice in Wonderland—with the same moving picture reshown over and over again, the same analysis, the same recommendations, the same inactions."[50] But if such policy fecklessness is inherent in the national crisis commissions, equally inherent is their heuristic value as an educational forum. To wit, my first book sold less than 3,000 copies; my second, the co-edited, half-historical *Violence in America,* sold a third of a million—and that had precious little to do, unfortunately, with *my* inherent qualities.

Furthermore, my complaints about ahistorical social science are not meant to imply that social science is inherently ahistorical, but rather that the behavioralist fad of the 1950s and early 1960s largely and disastrously abandoned the historical roots of early social analysis. By embracing the time- and culture-bound scientism of survey research and social psychology, behavioralism was temporarily blinded to the pull and momentum of historical continuity and to the crucial dimension of cross-cultural as well as transgenerational comparison. On the other hand, policy-conscious historians have learned from social science the importance of self-conscious theory, of systematic research design, of rigorous quantitative methods, and of computer usage (in *that* order).[51] In the field of social conflict, historians have made their chief contribution by analyzing the evolution and patterns of collective violence over the long haul—the dureé, to the *Annales* school—through the work of such European historians as George Rude, E. J. Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, the exceptional Tillys (Charles, Louise, and Richard Tilly), and the Americanists Richard Hofstadter, Michael Wallace, Allen Grimshaw, and Richard Maxwell Brown. But such preparation takes time, and is not conducive to the quick-fix of riot commissions. At present we are much more secure in our monographic understanding of the riots in Houston in 1917,[52] Chicago in 1919,[53] and Harlem in 1943,[54] than of the ex-

50. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,* 29.

51. As a social science dean for six years, I had not been originally so trained, and had to go back to school for postdoctoral retooling, or at least upgrading, at the Interuniversity Consortium for Political Research at the University of Michigan.

52. Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

53. William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

54. Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., *The Harlem Riot of 1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977).

plosive 1960s. When such historical depth and cross-cultural breadth is combined with the best social science analysis, we will be ready for the next crisis-induced national commission (my prime candidate is a National Commission on Immigration, which would test our professional readiness and steadiness to the core).

But for most of us, public history will not make its main contribution at the glamorous or infamous level of such national commissions, nor should it. Public history will earn its respect not at the level of metahistory, but at the far more important, far less glamorous, infinitely more practical and efficacious level that deals with such workaday policy questions as planning and zoning, land and water use, site-location, and transportation. Would that I had done my apprenticeship there.