

Bill Moyers Journal



March 28, 2008

BILL MOYERS: Welcome to the JOURNAL.

You have to go searching deep into their websites, to find out what the presidential candidates think about urban issues. Their speeches on the subject have been few and far between, and during all those debates of the past year, cities were rarely mentioned. Perhaps it's because to talk about cities, we have to think about the very touchy subject of race. Or perhaps the culprit is amnesia; we've simply forgotten the past that produced the urban challenges of today. Here's what I mean:

The official name for it was the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. But it passed through the press into popular lore as the Kerner Commission report, and that's how it's remembered today — at least to those of us old enough to remember. If you think all the talk about race in this presidential campaign is savage, you should have been around 40 years ago, in 1968, when this report was published. Talk about controversy! The Kerner Report was an unflinching portrait of America — and it was born from the flames of exploding cities.

BILL MOYERS: July 1967, Newark, New Jersey goes up in flames. Reacting to a rumor that police had beaten and allegedly killed a local man, residents protested peacefully at first. But then the scene turned violent.

For six days, state troops and police clashed in the streets with rioters. Twenty-six people were killed, including a ten year old boy.

Six days later, it happened again in Detroit, Michigan

NEWS REPORTER: Detroit. It looked like the wartime blitz on London, but this was no war, it was arson, looting, a race riot blowing up into something beyond control.

BILL MOYERS: Triggered by another police action, and another angry protest gone haywire, the destruction of downtown Detroit was worse than Newark's... the nation watched on TV as Detroit was torn apart.

As reports poured in of snipers shooting at police, President Lyndon Johnson called in the army to put an end to the violence. Thousands of blacks were rounded up, and a curfew was thrown over the city.

Five days on, forty-three people were dead, hundreds wounded, and block after block of inner-city Detroit was destroyed. Locals picked through the ruins, stunned and confused. Detroit's mayor said his city looked "like Berlin in 1945"

It wasn't just Newark and Detroit that erupted that year. Scores of other cities seemed under siege.

NEWS REPORTER: In 1967, 126 cities were hit by racial violence, with 75 incidents classified as major riots.

BILL MOYERS: The country was stunned and terrified...what was driving these events? President Johnson felt compelled to act.

LYNDON JOHNSON: We need to know the answer, I think, to three basic questions about these riots: What happened, why did it happen, what can be done to prevent it from happening again and again.

BILL MOYERS: To answer those questions, LBJ appointed what became known as the Kerner Commission... named for its Chairman, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. New York City's Mayor John Lindsay was Vice-Chair.

The youngest member of the panel was a populist senator from Oklahoma named Fred Harris. Just in his 30s at the time, and coming from a mostly white state, Harris nonetheless went to the floor of the Senate and called on the president to fully and publicly reckon with these awful events.

SENATOR FRED HARRIS: It's gonna take a national commitment, a massive kind of national commitment and anything less than that will not cure the ills that we have, and poverty generally, and the problems of race and the problems of our cities.

BILL MOYERS: The President listened. He was furious about these riots. Believing that militant groups such as the black panthers must've somehow been behind the violence.

But when the Kerner Commission's work was done, its findings would shake Lyndon Johnson, and the country. The Kerner Report became a moment of clarity for America. A time when the nation was forced to focus on the harsh realities of racism, poverty and injustice in our cities.

BILL MOYERS: On the 40th anniversary of this historic Kerner Commission Report, I asked that formerly-young Populist Senator Fred Harris to talk about his experience. He's one of the last of the surviving members of the original Commission.

BILL MOYERS: What was the urgency? I mean here you were just recently elected to the senate from Oklahoma, a basically white state, little town of Walters. What were you thinking? Is this the end of the country? Is this-- what is it?

FRED HARRIS: We just didn't know how-- how far this was gonna go. Johnson-- the President, later I went down to talk to him while we were working on the commission. And he said to me, "Have you seen the FBI reports about these riots?" Johnson was like a lot of people who thought maybe there's some conspiracy behind them. And I said conditions are such and the hostilities are such in these central cities that almost any random spark could've set them off .

BILL MOYERS: You and all the commission actually went to the streets where the riots were--

FRED HARRIS: That's right. We--

BILL MOYERS: What did you see? What all these years later, what are the particulars you remember most formidably?

FRED HARRIS: We divided up into teams. And my team was John Lindsay and me. John was then the Mayor of New York. You couldn't have had two more different people me from a little ole town in Oklahoma and John Lindsay.

BILL MOYERS: For one thing, he was tall, and you were short.

FRED HARRIS: That's right. And I remember one-- we went for example, we went to-- Milwaukee. And I spent a good portion of that day in a black barbershop. We found Milwaukee as segregated really, maybe more so, than southern cities. I kept saying to people-- "Do you run into much discrimination here in Milwaukee?" And people didn't know quite how to answer it. It turned out the reason was, that they didn't see any white people. That's how segregated Milwaukee was.

And we found there people, of course, and this was true all over. Black people had come up there looking for jobs.

BILL MOYERS: From the South.

FRED HARRIS: And the trouble was they found very little opportunity.

FRED HARRIS: Jobs is what we heard everywhere. John Lindsey and I were walking down the streets in Cleveland, I believe it was, for example. And we'd see idle young black men on the streets, you know. And these guys get up, and they said, "What we need is jobs baby. Jobs. Get us a job, baby." I remember that so-- and that's what we heard all over.

BILL MOYERS: It was the promise of those jobs that had lured so many African-Americans up from the south in the first place. From World War II on, millions of blacks migrated north. Packing into the booming industrial cities of Chicago and Newark, Milwaukee and Detroit. There they earned wages that were the first steps out of poverty for an entire generation.

But twenty years on, even as this great migration kept bringing more and more people into the cities, many of those jobs began dwindling. Huge plants closed down. Moved out to the suburbs and beyond. Many white residents followed suit, leaving the central cities in droves.

By the mid-1960s, many of the biggest inner-cities in America had become chronically segregated. And were drying up economically.

FRED HARRIS: There was low family income, high unemployment. Almost criminally inferior schools. No jobs. The jobs had moved out to the suburbs. There was poor transportation. People couldn't get, you had to take two or three buses to get to some of those jobs. And there were jobs, the new jobs that were created, were either requiring a very high level of skills or education, or were just service jobs that were very low pay kind of flipping hamburgers kind of jobs. The people that black people saw as sort of representing society were police officers. And they were nearly all white. And most of them lived outside the central city. And came in during the day to enforce the law. So there was a great deal of hostility.

BILL MOYERS: I had a remarkable woman on this broadcast a few months ago, Grace Lee Boggs. She's 91 years old, still lives in, Detroit. She said, "Bill, this was not a riot. This was a rebellion. This rebellion against what you just described as the phalanx of white faces that surrounded the ghetto and kept it segregated." She said it was a rebellion against the loss of jobs. Do you think there's something to that?

FRED HARRIS: Well there is, in a way. Although you've gotta be careful to say, you know, it wasn't some organized thing. That is it wasn't a rebellion in the sense that somebody decided to organize it, with a definite ends in mind, goals. It was more spontaneous than that. But what we finally decided on the commission was we couldn't say what caused the violence. Or why the violence would occur, for example, in Watts in '65, but not in '67. What we could do was to describe with particularity, the terrible conditions that existed in these places, where riots had occurred.

We found as I said, no conspiracy. There were one or two on our commission said, "Well, should we actually say that?" Well, isn't that the truth?

BILL MOYERS: There was no conspiracy?

FRED HARRIS: There was no conspiracy. No organization to this. And they were, "Well, yeah. Well, let's just tell the truth."

OTTO KERNER: (Illinois Governor, Chairman of Kerner Commission) There is no indication, no fact, to indicate that any of them were planned. The elements were there. And some fuse, an unpredictable fuse, set them off, but at this point there is still no evidence for any planning for the civil disorders within the cities.

BILL MOYERS: In March of 1968, the Report was published. It was brutal in its honesty:

While saying that a growing black militancy may have added fuel to the riots, the commission rejected the idea that there'd been any organization behind the outbreaks.

Instead, the Commission blamed the violence on the devastating poverty and hopelessness endemic in the inner cities of the 1960s.

Among their many findings:

One in five African-Americans lived in "squalor and deprivation in ghetto neighborhoods."

The unemployment rate was double for African-Americans, as compared to whites.

The report described communities that were neglected by their government, wracked with crime, and traumatized by police brutality.

Disproportionate rates of infant mortality were astonishing - African-American children dying at triple the rate of white children.

The statistics weren't new. But the Kerner Commission pushed further, and laid the blame for many of these conditions on white racism: quote "what white Americans have never fully understood -- but what the Negro can never forget -- is that the white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it. White institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."

The report's conclusion — and it's most memorable message — was this: "our nation is moving towards two societies - one white, one black - separate and unequal."

FRED HARRIS: We used the word racism. And on the commission, we had two or three people say, "Should we use that word, racism?"

BILL MOYERS: Not a word that was thrown around largely by-- government panels in the 1960s.

FRED HARRIS: We felt that was very important. I did and I think it was to say it. Because what we know is that oppressed people often come to believe about themselves the same bad stereotypes that the dominant society has. Our saying racism-- I think was very important to a lot of black people who said, "Well, maybe it's not just me. Maybe I'm not-- by myself at fault here. Maybe there's something else going on."

BILL MOYERS: I remember that the headlines based on the premature leak of a summary of the report would read-"A Commission Blames Riots on Whites."

FRED HARRIS: That's right.

BILL MOYERS: White racism. And that inflamed-- whites who didn't want to be blamed.

FRED HARRIS: No, that's right. But we felt-- now I think if we had time to background it so that people would have understood it a little better. What we're telling about-- with racism was not - one white person hating one black-- or all black people. We're talking about kind of an institutional racism which existed. And where people live in all white neighborhoods. Send their kids to all white schools. Drive quickly through black section maybe, or on the train, to a job where all their associates are white. And don't see anything odd about it. That was what-

BILL MOYERS: The natural order of things.

FRED HARRIS: That's right. That's what we were talking about.

BILL MOYERS: For civil rights leaders like the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. the Kerner Report confirmed reality

MARTIN LUTHER KING: And now we see the surfacing of old prejudices and hostilities that have always been there and they're out in the open — that's very good they're out in the open because you can deal with them much better when they are there to see and when people admit them. My analysis was no more pessimistic or gloomy than the Kerner Commission's report the other day. I do feel that we've got to say in no uncertain terms that racism is alive and on the throne in American society and that we are moving towards two societies... separate and unequal and if something isn't done to stop this in a very determined manner, things can really get worse.

BILL MOYERS: The Kerner Commissioners suggested a series of solutions to tackle the problems they'd diagnosed. Everything from better early childhood education to a crackdown on police brutality. They pushed for massive job creation, more affirmative action, and an expansion of the social safety net.

But critics saw the Commission as wrongheaded. They blasted Kerner for blaming everyone in society except for the rioters themselves.

Commission members had hoped to spend six more months explaining their report to the public and lobbying for their recommendations, but in the face of all the criticism, LBJ shelved that idea.

BILL MOYERS: Looking back all this time, what did the Kerner Commission get right?

FRED HARRIS: I think well virtually everything was right. And I could add onto that this. I think one of the awfulest thing's that came out of the Reagan presidency and later was the feeling that government can't do anything right. And that-- everything it does is wrong. The truth is that virtually everything we tried worked. We just quit trying it. Or we didn't try it hard enough. And that's what we need to get back to. We made progress on virtually every aspect of race and poverty-- for about a decade after the Kerner Commission Report. And then, particularly with the advent of the Reagan Administration, and so forth, that progress stopped. And we began to go backwards. There are consequences from our acts, and when we-- cut out a lot of these-- social

programs, or the money for them, or cut it down-- we don't emphasize jobs and training, and education, and so forth as we had been doing, there are bad consequences from that.

BILL MOYERS: The Reagan conservatives were quite critical of the Kerner Commission as being unbalanced and simplistic. They say, for example, that you failed to take into consideration that the close correlation between being born out of wedlock, and growing up without a father, and being poor, that your work over the years actually exempts the poor from being responsible for their own condition.

FRED HARRIS: Well, you know, the breakdown in families is just like sort of crime and narcotics and so forth. These are the consequences. They're the handmaidens in the sense of poverty .

FRED HARRIS: I said at the time, there are a lot of people who want to-- punish people for being poor. You know, say, "It's your own fault." We want to punish people for being poor. I said, "I used to poor myself. And being poor is punishment enough." I think what you need to do is to help people-- up, give 'em a hand up. And recognize the kind of terrible conditions that they're grown up in.

BILL MOYERS: For the last thirty years, Fred Harris has been teaching politics at the University of New Mexico.

FRED HARRIS: Power was diffused and one way it was diffused was to break all these committees down into subcommittees...

BILL MOYERS: But he never lost his commitment to the cause of the Kerner Commission. When he's not in the classroom, he's part of major, ongoing investigation into the issues of race and poverty today.

Harris sits on the board of the Eisenhower Foundation based in Washington D.C. the Foundation was created to continue the Kerner Commission. Its work is to research and support successful programs in the inner cities.

Every few years, Eisenhower publishes an updated set of findings: a report card of how the country is dealing with the key issues raised by Kerner.

Alan Curtis is President of the Eisenhower Foundation.

ALAN CURTIS: The Kerner Commission said, "Look. These problems can be solved. Let's not give up hope. And so, we try to be keepers of the flame of that message. That there is hope. There are solutions. And we remind America every so often, that we still have a long ways to go in fulfilling the prophesies of those commissions and their recommendations.

BILL MOYERS: Alan Curtis and Fred Harris have been holding hearings in Washington, Detroit and Newark to prepare a report on the 40th anniversary of Kerner.

ALAN CURTIS: We want to listen. We're taking testimony. We would encourage you to discuss today not only the solutions, but how to change political will in America so that we can embrace the priorities of the Kerner Commission and we can begin to fulfill America's promise.

BILL MOYERS: In those cities, they heard a striking set of voices.

KOMOZI WOODARD: We've gone from an urban crisis in the '60s to an urban catastrophe in the 21st Century. That's what you're looking at when you look at Katrina. That's what you're looking at when you look at gentrification. We are in an urban catastrophe community, we need to be blunt about it because if we use the wrong words, it doesn't wake people up, It puts them to sleep. This is not an ordinary situation and it is a national situation. It is not a Newark situation.

JUNIUS WILLIAMS: Big northeastern cities are home to some of the most concentrated poverty in the country, and that's your new split. That's your new division.

RONALD ANGLIN: We're seeing lives of quiet desperation that we have cordoned off communities in which we allow crime to exist. We allow lots of bad things to exist, and as long as they don't spill over, that's okay.

RICHARD CAMMARERI: I would take issue with one of the premises of the most famous quote in this that we're moving towards two societies. I would respectfully suggest that we never were one society in this country. This country has simply never confronted the issue of race. . Race is, I guess to use a religious term, the original sin of this country.

HEASTER WHEELER: I believe 40 years later, today the conditions here in Southeast Michigan are just as ripe for protest, and demonstration, and possibly all those other negative things as they were 40 years later. You need not look too far to see Jena, Louisiana and all of the other challenges.

MAUREEN TAYLOR: On my way here, there are people on corners, standing up with signs, say, "Will work for food." But we're in here, talking about what's the problem?

JOSEPHINE HUYGHE: You want to know what's going on? It's somebody say, "It's the same old, same old." With the continuation of white flight that started in the '50s has been compounded by the exodus of the middle and upper class blacks as Detroit experienced a 'brain drain'.

DR. HERBERT SMITHERMAN: In 1970, the infant mortality rate, that is our babies dying before age of one, was about 65 percent higher in the black community than in the white community. Currently, it's 205 percent higher in the black community than in the white community.

GEORGE GALSTER: The City of Detroit constitutes 85 percent black residents, only nine percent white residents. The poverty rate -- white, it's only 5.9 percent, blacks: 24 percent. The median family income -- for whites, over \$65,000, for blacks, only \$37,000. We could go on and

on, but, it's very clear that there are these measurable distinctions between blacks and whites in metro Detroit.

REV. KEVIN TURMAN: The young people of my congregation and my community are as industrious as you will find anywhere. They are as innovative and as intelligent as any that you will find anywhere. But unfortunately, they have a number of challenges that have been un-addressed, because the recommendations of the Kerner Commission were ignored or dismissed.

ROY LEVY WILLIAMS: The one industry which has flourished is the prison industry. And, yes, it has become an industry. During the last 15 years, this state has been averaging one brand new prison a year.

GLENDIA MCGADNEY: We have got to get serious about what's going on and what our government is allowing to happen to us, and how we're losing our rights every single day. And all this money that's being spent for the war, we need to pray about that. Because it should not be going to Iraq. It should be right here in our cities, in our neighborhood.

DR. HERBERT SMITHERMAN: When we had 9/11, we were arguing about Social Security reform. Where are we gonna find the money for it? And within 48 hours after 9/11, we found \$40 billion for New York City, a billion dollars an hour. When we want to do something as a country, we do it. This is not about can we do. This is about a will. This is about do we want to do. When you start saying I'm gonna have cuts in Medicare and Medicaid, cuts to housing in urban development, no subsidies to mass transit, eliminate funding for job training, cut school lunch programs for inner city children, eliminate school loan programs for minority students, repeal after-school programs. What I'm saying is this is about public policy. This is about resource implementation.

KARL GREGORY: The 1968 Kerner Commission conclusion that racism is deeply embedded in the American society is still true. Racism is still as American as apple pie in this area. The existing huge disparities by race could not exist without racism.

BILL MOYERS: The Eisenhower Foundation has now issued their preliminary report and it echoed the testimony they heard across the country:

While noting that certain things have improved - such as the dramatic growth of the black middle class - the foundation nonetheless concludes that "America has, for the most part, failed to meet the Kerner Commission's goals of less poverty, inequality, racial injustice and crime."

Among the troubling facts:

Thirty seven million Americans live in poverty today. But African-Americans are three times as likely to be at the very bottom of the scale, living in what's known as 'deep poverty'.

Median non-white families have just one-fifth the wealth of white families.

And...over the last 20 years, three times as many African-American men go to prison as go to college.

ALAN CURTIS: Many people today-- Americans have short memories, of course-- don't realize, for example, that the sentence for a minority person is longer than a sentence for a white person going to prison. Minorities are more likely to get the death sentence than white. The sentences for crack cocaine, used disproportionately by minorities, are longer than the sentences for powdered cocaine, used disproportionately by whites. And so, there is still this endemic, institutional racism in America that people forget about. And I think they need to be reminded about that.

BILL MOYERS: The Eisenhower Foundation's full report will be released later this year.

BILL MOYERS: Fred, you've been teaching democracy down there at the University of New Mexico for 30 years. Your textbook on democracy is used in universities all over the country. Why can't democracy deal with these persistent, chronic realities that the Kerner Commission described and you here 40 years later are restating?

FRED HARRIS: Well I think first of all-- people don't really realize that conditions are so bad for so many people in poverty and-- and for African-Americans, and for Hispanics. I think a lot of people say, well, didn't we do all that? And I think if people knew these conditions and that's what we ought to do on the 40th anniversary of the Kerner Report is to get people to see that these problems of race and poverty are still with us. Also, I think we need to approach this on a basis of that we're all in this together. Somebody said we may not have all come over on the same boat but we're all in the same boat now.

And here's the interesting thing. Every poll that's taken shows that two-thirds of Americans think America's on the wrong footing. They're headed in the wrong direction. And there's overwhelming support for example this: do you think we ought to spend more on-- in prevention-- by putting money in education and training and jobs, instead of police and prisons. Overwhelmingly people say, yes. Do you think that we ought to have a social net-- so-- just to catch people falling out and to give them another chance? Oh, yes, they strongly believe in that. What about healthcare? We got 46 million people without health insurance. And yet overwhelmingly Americans say, yes, I think we ought to have-- healthcare even if-- everybody-- universal healthcare even if it costs us more money. So the public is way ahead of the politicians I think.

And I just think that, as I said, it's in our own interests, and everybody's interests to try to do something about it. We can do it.



The Kerner Commission and the Media



March 28, 2008

In addition to tracing the 1967 civil disorders to root causes of poverty, inequality in income and education, crime and racial injustice, The Kerner Commission singled out the media for criticism. In the section, "The Communications Media, Ironically, Have Failed to Communicate" the report stated: "We have found a significant imbalance between what actually happened in our cities and what the newspaper, radio and television coverage of the riots told us happened," The Commission criticized the media's use of "scare" headlines, and exaggeration of the scope of the riots. (For example: At the height of the Detroit riot, some news reports of property damage put the figure in excess of \$500 million. Subsequent investigation shows it to be \$40 to \$45 million.)

But the Commission also targeted deeper seated problems in the media:

Our second and fundamental criticism is that the news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on racial problems in the United States and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro's legitimate expectations in journalism. By and large, news organizations have failed to communicate to both their black and white audiences a sense of the problems America faces and the sources of potential solutions.

The Commission had several recommendations for the media: News organizations must employ enough Negroes in positions of significant responsibility to establish an effective link to Negro actions and ideas and to meet legitimate employment expectations. Tokenism—the hiring of one Negro reporter, or even two or three—is no longer enough.

The news media must publish newspapers and produce programs that recognize the existence and activities of the Negro, both as a Negro and as part of the community. It would be a contribution of inestimable importance to race relations in the United States simply to treat ordinary news about Negroes as news of other groups is now treated.

James Hiram Malone, GHETTO HEADLINES, National Archive

Both the Eisenhower Commission's 40th anniversary assessment and the Kerner Plus 40 project undertaken by The Annenberg School for Communication and the Center for Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies (IFAJS) at North Carolina A&T State University, found that many problems remain in today's media. Darnell M. Hume noted in "The media and race, 40 years after Kerner" that "forty years after Kerner we continue to confront a reality in which news stories are routinely told 'from the standpoint of a white man's world.'" The Eisenhower Foundation Report found that "locally and nationally, there is little room for covering a host of issues that affect families, neighborhoods and communities.

....Coverage of minority communities, women, rural communities....and just about everyone else who doesn't live in a handful of ZIP codes in places like New York, Los Angeles and Washington DC is badly warped and leads to ill-informed attitudes and misrepresentations in American society."

Both studies trace some of the continuing problems to increasing concentration in the media. As BILL MOYERS JOURNAL has reported, minority media ownership is set to decline further as FCC ownership cap rules are relaxed. In 2007 out of more than 10,000 radio stations nationwide, they own only 635 - or just about six percent. And African-Americans and Latinos own only 33 of the nation's 1350 TV stations.

MayorTV's Andrea Batista Schlesinger noted in our interview with her that much coverage of the urban world still follows the "if it bleeds it leads" formula — like the headlines in James Hiram Malone's painting "Ghetto Headlines," pictured above.

How do you think the media's doing? [Tell us on the Blog.](#)

Published on March 28, 2008.