

DOC NYC Film Festival 2023: Part 2

The Riot Report: A conscientious, flawed examination of the 1967-68 Kerner Commission

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4 January 2024

This article is the second in a series devoted to the 2023 DOC NYC film festival, which was held on November 8–26. The first article is available [here](#).

The Riot Report (2023), a film focused on the Kerner Commission, had its world premiere at the DOC NYC film festival. Directed by Michelle Ferrari, the movie is a serious attempt to examine the commission that President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed to investigate the causes of the “race riots” that had erupted in cities such as Los Angeles, Newark and Detroit in the 1960s.

Making use of archival footage and contemporary interviews, *The Riot Report* discusses the events leading to the commission’s appointment; the members, work and findings of the commission; and the events that followed the publication of the commission’s report. But despite its conscientiousness, the film fails to grasp the commission’s true character or the roots of the social wretchedness it uncovered. This failure results from Ferrari’s implicit acceptance of race, and not capitalism, as the fundamental question at issue. In this way, the documentary mirrors the conclusions of the commission itself.

The Riot Report begins by discussing the uprising in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1965 and the rebellions in Newark, New Jersey and Detroit in 1967. Police brutality provided the spark for these explosions of anger and frustration. Militarized police, sent to repress these rebellions, contributed to their escalation. News broadcasts of the resulting scenes of violence, some of which are presented in the film, sent shock waves across the country. A commentator observes that streets in American cities suddenly looked like war zones in distant lands.

While the disturbance in Detroit was ongoing, Johnson publicly announced the formation of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which was later nicknamed the Kerner Commission after its chair, Illinois Governor

Otto Kerner Jr. Johnson asked the commission to answer the following three questions: “What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again?” He urged the commission to “seek the truth.”

The film introduces the members of the commission, including Kerner, a reform-minded Democrat; Mayor John Lindsay of New York, a liberal Republican (one of a species now extinct); and Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma, the son of a sharecropper and a Democrat, still alive (born 1930) and interviewed extensively for the film. The commission also included representatives of industry, the trade unions and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Though the members had ideological differences, they made a good faith effort to investigate the uprisings and develop, within the limits of official bourgeois politics, a humane social response. Viewers who do not remember these events may be surprised to learn that members of the commission visited the cities themselves and talked to people on the street, in barbershops and in their homes about their experiences.

But the film does not make the point that immediately strikes any politically conscious viewer: such a serious investigation into an urgent social crisis could never happen today. The federal government’s responses to the George Floyd protests, the COVID-19 pandemic and President Donald Trump’s attempted coup amply demonstrate this point. In addition, Kerner, Lindsay and Harris seem to resemble not just creatures from another era, but also another planet, compared with contemporary reactionaries and ignoramuses like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, New York City Mayor Eric Adams, and Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene. US imperialism in its decay and disintegration is no longer capable of offering reforms, and

its human personnel reflect its inner rot and putrefaction.

Although the commission was divided on many questions, it nevertheless adopted its final report unanimously. It found that the riots occurred in response to inadequate opportunities for education, a lack of jobs, overcrowded neighborhoods, substandard housing and police harassment and violence. These intolerable conditions were the fruits of a society based on the private ownership of industry and the profit system. But as earnest and well-intentioned as many of the commission's members were, they did not draw this conclusion, of course, because they accepted and upheld capitalism.

Instead of identifying the profit system as the source of acute deprivation, the commission pointed to "white racism." Racism was a significant and pressing issue, but it could not explain the persistent poverty and social inequality in America, which was not unique to the inner cities, nor could it then or now be solved through admonitions and moral appeals.

The social forces promoting racism and the class interests that it served had to first be understood. The Kerner Commission, however, evaded such questions for definite political reasons, thereby obscuring the objective economic process that created the conditions for the riots. *The Riot Report* takes the commission's statements on racism at face value, thus perpetuating the obfuscation.

Although it shielded US capitalism from blame for the riots, the commission nevertheless called for massive social expenditures to improve conditions of life. It proposed government spending to create a million new jobs, increased school funding, the building of six million affordable housing units, the expansion of welfare and the establishment of a guaranteed minimum income. These proposals again underscore the political gulf between that era and the present. When the report was published, it quickly became a bestseller.

But Johnson saw the report as a threat and an indictment of his administration. He had already overseen reforms such as Medicaid and declared a war on poverty, which he believed that the government could afford to wage simultaneously with the Vietnam war. But the imperialist war received far more funding than the war on poverty, as the documentary observes. And the ongoing decline of America's industrial and financial hegemony meant that Johnson could not afford both guns and butter. Finally, he opted for guns. Johnson never thanked the Kerner Commission for its work nor accepted its report. The recommendations were conspicuously ignored.

Perhaps unintentionally, Ferrari's *The Riot Report* reveals the negative consequences of the commission's focus on racism and its exoneration of capitalism. In a contemporary

interview, a distraught Harris describes his father's objection to the report. Harris' father, a struggling farmer, asked why he should pay more in taxes to help black people when he was not receiving any assistance himself in exchange for his tax payments. The commission tacitly accepted the premise that the total quantity of jobs and resources in society was limited, and therefore enabled the issue to be framed as though ethnic or racial groups had to be pitted against one another in a fierce struggle for pieces of the pie.

The emphasis on race also was a political gift to Richard Nixon, who exploited the fears of sections of the white middle class and called for law and order during his 1968 presidential campaign. Nixon would also extol so-called black capitalism, which elevated a layer of African Americans into the corporate and financial oligarchy while leaving the system of exploitation and all its social miseries untouched. With Nixon's victory, says Harris, the country began to move backward on race and every other issue. Nixon oversaw carpet bombing of North Vietnam and Cambodia, introduced wage controls and declared a war on drugs that started a decades-long increase in the incarceration rate.

The Riot Report includes much footage that not only provides firsthand information about the events it examines, but also brings immediacy to the latter. The questions of poverty, racism and rebellion hardly belong to the past. Conditions have worsened for great numbers of people, while a handful control the wealth of kings.

Ferrari has made a thoughtful and broad-ranging effort to understand the Kerner Commission and its time. Yet the film accepts the commission's perspective uncritically and thus obscures the fundamental cause of the riots. Nor can the film explain the rise of Nixon or the tide of reaction that followed. Finally, the film's failure to compare the political environment of the late 1960s with today's is a missed opportunity to provide historical perspective and shed light on current conditions.

To be continued



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