As these lines go to press, the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders is expected to hand in its report on March 1, 1968, a short six months after it was instituted and a full six months before it was initially expected to complete its work. The conclusions of the Anti-Riot Commission, as it is known in Washington, are expected to be highly controversial; already the sides are arranging themselves—to contest or support its positions. Less widely asked is the question: to what extent do the statements of this and other such Commissions deserve such attention? What are they based on? Are their description of the conditions they report upon and their diagnoses of the ills—on which their prognoses are based—accurate, at least within limits of tolerable error? Do they have the membership and staff capable of research?

The Anti-Riot Commission, for instance, is headed by a Governor of Illinois, Otto Kerner. Its members are politicians, businessmen and lawyers; there is not one social scientist among its members or any other researcher. Initially there were some social scientists among its staff members, hired to investigate the causes and dynamics of riots. But most of these social scientists have resigned by now, and the Anti-Riot Commission, racing against a deadline, "farmed out" its research work to campus-based researchers and private advisory corporations. Given only a few months to conduct their work, some of these researchers simply did not complete their work; others handed in what they themselves considered half-processed or even shoddy work.

The issue is not that one Commission excluded experts from among its members and relied on busy politicians and community leaders for its membership, but the general American usage of this particular procedure for the study of public needs and issues. The work of several such commissions came recently under critical review. Daniel Bell explored the work of the National Commission on Technology, Automation and Economic Progress, of which he was a member. (His discussion was published in The Public Interest.) Robert Blauner, a Berkeley sociologist, blasted the McGone report in Transaction and Edward J. Epstein, a graduate of Cornell and Harvard, studied the work of the Warren Commission in a booklength report entitled Inquest.

Common Features of Commissions These and other commissions tend to have the following features in common which help
to explain the frequently inadequate nature of their products: (a) Most of their members are eminent citizens, chosen not because of their expert knowledge but because of their civic stature. (b) The members all have some other full-time position and numerous additional commitments. (c) Lawyers are much over-represented and other relevant disciplines are often not represented at all. (For instance, the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice had no criminologist or sociologist among its members. It was made up almost entirely of political and legal leaders.) (d) Much of the actual work is done by a staff, but its members too tend to be lawyers, burdened with other commitments (not the least of which is to find employment once the ad hoc job is completed), and usually not adequately guided by the commission itself. (e) The procedure of a semi-judicial process (of “hearings”) is frequently used but it is not suited to the purposes of studying a situation, (f) and the pressure to reach consensus is considerable.

No wonder the Warren Commission report, based on less than ten weeks’ work, according to Epstein, seems full of holes; the McCone report was sharply contradicted by a later study of the Watts area, and the report of the automation commission was carefully filed away and little has been heard about it since.

**Balm and Consensus** I was commenting to a friend, long active in Washington, on this haphazard way of studying major societal problems; no self-respecting corporation would open an overseas branch on the basis of such a study. Conferences and commissions, he felt, are part of the American way of life. They are not meant to provide systematic analysis, new information or deep insight (at least that is not their main purpose), but to soothe an alarmed public (“seven wise men are studying the problem”), delay the need to take action, build consensus around (i.e., public support for) a policy, and maybe learn something on the side.

That did make a lot of sense, only it seemed to me that these political ends could be served—even more effectively—in other ways, and if conferences and commissions are dedicated mainly to these purposes, there ought to be some other mechanism for societal learning.

The commissions’ work should be clearly divided into two separate parts, one to be served by experts and the other by consensus-makers, whatever title these two groups may be given. The experts have to be numerous enough, have sufficient funds and time, and include representation of the relevant disciplines before they may be able to do their job. The efforts of the experts need to be concerted; they require a staff director who is used to working with teams of experts; and they need facilities such as access to libraries and computers. Such
An Approach to Consensus  

The consensus-makers ought to represent the various segments of the public, interests, values, and viewpoints. The consensus-makers may meet at first to set, as clearly as they can, the issues, the questions which are to be answered, and their preconceptions. Then the experts should get to work. They should sporadically brief the consensus-makers on their findings as their work progresses so as to note the additional questions these findings raise and prepare the consensus-makers for the final expert report. Such briefings as well as the report ought to be closed to the public and press; otherwise the experts may unwittingly absorb part of the consensus-makers’ function by by-passing them, going directly to the public. Once the final report is completed, the consensus-makers may discuss it, draw the policy conclusions, and publish the expert report with their own interpretations, evaluations, and recommendations. Minority reports should be encouraged rather than frowned upon.

Such an approach would cost more and take longer than the present procedure; it may even produce less consensus. But action taken on the basis of such reports would be more effective and they would be more difficult to ignore.

All reports should have a built-in evaluation and revision mechanism. That is, if Commission X and its experts argue that steps a, b, and c will prevent riots in long, hot summers, they should meet again—next winter—to check to what extent their recommendations were effective, generate some pressure if their advice has been neglected (and the situation worsened as they foretold), or revise their recommendations if those were followed but did not have the desired result. More continuity in staff work, overview, and more follow-up will not solve all our problems but they could go a long way toward making our conferences and commissions more valuable. Now they mainly handle the politics of the issues rather than help handle the issues themselves, and this ultimately is even bad politics. If nothing else, that is what we can learn from the Kerner, Warren, McCone, and Automation Commissions.
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