

Making Riots Mandatory

by Amitai Etzioni

REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS. 608 pages. Bantam Books (paper). 1968. \$1.25.

On the face of it, the report of the President's Commission on Civil Disorders should be warmly applauded by any citizen who is concerned with civil rights, social justice, and the welfare of his country. The Commission minces no words in identifying the causes of our malaise, in predicting what awaits us if we do not act swiftly and drastically to cure our social ills, and in challenging dangerously misleading interpretations of last summer's events.

The main cause of riots, the Commission states in plain English, is "white racism." or, as Tom Wicker puts it in his introduction to this edition of the report, "White refusal to accept Negroes as human beings, social and economic equals." As for the future, the Commission predicts, "to pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values." It also proclaims that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Riots are not caused by any conspiracy; they have no one pattern and are not coordinated. Domestic reforms should have top priority in the nation's goals, the Commission suggests. While Vietnam is discussed only once, and on page 232 at that, it is quite clear which item on our national agenda must be down-graded if the Commission's warnings are to be heeded.

The blue-ribbon Commission's report won wide applause for courageously advocating several sweeping correctives: two million jobs should be created within three years.

Racial desegregation in education should be fought for more vigorously, relying on the arm of the law and on federal rewards to those who comply and financial sanctions against those who do not. Welfare should be greatly extended and be put on a national basis. Six million new housing units should be built within five years. Political leaders should listen more to the ghetto's demands and make room for more participation of ghetto leaders. In short, the Commission fully subscribes to the liberal theory of the causes of riots and how these causes may be treated. More employment, education, housing and investment, and "Participation" are its main remedies. By the same token, the report subscribes to the goals of the Great Society, but it is obviously dissatisfied with the slower than slow pace with which they are being implemented. Typically, it calls for building in five years the amount of housing units President Johnson was asking Congress to help construct in the next ten years.

The Commission deserves at least one more kudo: it correctly interpreted its assignment as basic and not "symptomatic" treatment. Riots are a sign that social tensions, of which all societies have some, have reached a level with which the normal mechanisms can no longer cope. If the resulting outbreaks are merely suppressed, deeper convulsions are sure to follow; a basic cure is needed.

Finally, in line with the liberal bent of the theory which underlies the whole report, the Commission rejects diagnoses and remedies of the right and the left, as well as of black groupings. It rejects the charge that the riots were

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liberal Congress (thanks to the anti-Goldwater 1964 landslide) passed a spate of civil rights, anti-poverty, welfare and other domestic reform bills which at the time seemed to initiate the social transformation for which most Negro-Americans hoped. Much more sweeping than the reforms initiated were the promises made. President Johnson's speeches at the time—at Howard University, for instance—detailed in powerful language the cruel injustices that society had inflicted on the Negro. He spoke, on June 5, 1965, of "the right to share, share fully, and equally in American society." This was not enough, he stated. "We seek not just legal equity but human ability. Not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result." He concluded: "I pledge you tonight that this will be a chief goal of my administration and of my program *next year* and in the years to come." But numerous other speeches and promises were followed by rather little action on the domestic front. Resources were deflected and the government's attention was increasingly absorbed by the Vietnam war. Despite repeated assertions that the United States is rich enough to have both guns and butter, the country spent more in Saigon alone than in all American cities combined. The war costs now per annum total \$24.5 billion by government estimates, \$32 billion by U.S. Senate sources. The war on poverty is funded at approximately \$2 billion a year.

This was the background for the severest riots the U.S. has known in decades, riots which erupted in Detroit and in Newark in the summer of 1967. The Congress has since cut back those domestic programs which benefit the under-class, including bills aimed at control of rats in slums, welfare for mothers and children, and the Job Corps. Meanwhile, the National Guards have purchased more and heavier arms. The White House responded to the riots by calling for a national day of prayer—and by appointing the Commission on Civil Disorders. As James Reston

pointed out at the time, this was an attempt to handle the politics of the situation rather than the situation itself. Appointing the Commission implied that study was needed before we could act, and thus allowed the political leadership to claim that it was not neglecting the issue, while still in effect doing nothing. Now the Commission has delivered this report, but—as was expected—there is much that is true but very little new in the Commission's analysis and even less in its recommendations. There is no sign that the President, who appointed the Commission presumably to inform himself of what is to be done, intends to implement its major recommendations.

The reader of the Report will soon realize that the Commission did not accept a "task force" assignment, that of finding specific programs which could be realistically implemented in 1968 America. The Commission's almost complete disregard of the need for its recommendations to be endorsed and implemented under the present political contingencies can be seen in its failure to provide even a rough estimate of the costs which the programs it advocates would incur, and to indicate from where the needed funds might come. Various estimates by other sources of the expenditures involved suggest that scores of billions would be required. George Mahon, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, estimated that "If you really got to tackling this thing, \$100 billion wouldn't go very far." (A small income-supplementation program, much smaller than the one the Commission advocates as one item on a long list of desired reforms, would cost \$9 billion a year.)

But the whole approach makes sense only if the war in Vietnam is terminated and the funds budgeted for it are fully assigned to the domestic front—or if taxes are raised *very* substantially. *This* point the otherwise candid Commission did not make.

The Commission's lack of interest in the ways its recommendations might become pub-

lic policy can also be seen in the way it formulated its proposals. He who is concerned with implementation must be willing to formulate his program not merely to elicit a swell of applause on Sunday and be ignored on Monday, but in such a way as to mobilize broad political support. Not that the program should be tailored to suit existing misconceptions of opposing vested interests, but its choice of labels, formulas, and details should be made to accommodate as many "friendly" forces as possible and win over some wavering ones. It may even be necessary to provide inducements for groups less deserving than the Negro or the poor, but whose support is essential and cannot be assured otherwise. The Commission shows very little taste for such an approach. Typically, it advocates a version of the negative income tax approach to the relief of poverty, an approach which is very unpopular with politicians and voters because it smacks of subsidizing those who do not wish to work and because it provides benefits only for the under-class. The Commission seems not to have even considered an alternative approach, that of family allowance, which is used successfully in Canada, Britain and Scandinavia. This program, built around support for children, provides equal allowances for all children, but particularly helps the poor (who in this country include the children of die-hard segregationists as well as Negroes) since much of the allowance given to the affluent classes is taxed back. The same apolitical wishful thinking marks many of the Commission's other recommendations.

A Secondary Mission: The Commission may be said to have deliberately focused on a different mission, one that was not explicitly assigned, but which could be legitimately construed as one of its "latent functions," that of public education. Its strong rhetoric and sweeping suggestions might be said to have opened the way to more moderate action, by alerting people for the need to act and by making other programs seem less radical. Unfortunately, this is not the case. People are

not swayed, especially on matters which have such age-old emotional roots, by any flurry of headlines—or by reading a 581-page report. A long, thorough, intimate educational drive is necessary; but the Commission has very little to say about ways in which the white community may be enlightened.

As for Negroes, the Commission has—for a moment—rekindled their hopes that the white community will see the true dimensions of the crisis and act accordingly. By the time these lines are printed, these hopes will have given way to a deepened sense of frustration, as the gap between what moderate whites say must be done and what actually is done stands out more sharply than before. The Commission's report is thus in the same class with the President's great 1964 and 1965 speeches on civil rights. It has deepened the credibility gap. Words do buy time, but time is now running out for words; yet it is words, not programs which will be implemented, that are the Commission's main product.

Why Commissions Fail: This outcome is not accidental; previous commissions have had a similar fate.* Commissions are designed to paper over the gnawing gaps which soon will show again in all their nakedness. What was needed instead was a task force of experts, White House aides, and representatives of federal agencies working in closed session (as in the British and Swedish tradition) with clear presidential guidelines, seeking the optimal programs that the President and concerned congressmen would be willing to throw their weight behind, finding formulas which would make the new programs as widely acceptable as possible, and providing pay-offs which would make them tolerable to forces which otherwise would be sure to block them. While such an approach may be resented by citizens already convinced of the need to act

*Daniel Bell discussed in similar terms the outcome of the work of the National Commission of Technology, Automation and Economic Progress. "Government by Commission," *The Public Interest*, No. 3, Spring, 1966, pp. 3-9.

drastically in favor of the under-class, the fact is that in a democracy no significant action can be taken—not even a meat packaging or drug pricing bill passed, let alone a multi-billion dollar program on a highly controversial issue—without such political homework. This the Commission did not do and was not equipped to do. Its members were not the President's confidants on an inter-agency executive task-force, but rather a labor leader, a police chief from Atlanta, a Republican mayor, one civil rights leader, Kentucky's Commissioner of Commerce, an industrialist, an assortment of Congressmen, and a governor. Moreover, as these fine men and women were busily occupied with their own full-time jobs and scores of other civic commitments, they could devote only a small fraction of the Commission's short seven months to the task at hand. The ad hoc staff thrown together to assist the Commission was particularly unable to handle tough problems. Key staff members resigned or were fired. The training of many of the others was of an exclusively legal nature. Much of the first research was conducted in a tremendous rush, by inexperienced personnel, and was not completed by the time the Commission's report was due.

A Commission like the Kerner one would have been quite useful in legitimating and building consensus around recommendations worked out by an expert and "insider" task force; but no such set of recommendations were available to this Commission, and it is this task-force we need now. Such a body would take as its starting point the initial definition of the situation provided in the Commission's report. It should not raise new hopes; on the contrary, it must make clear that while Negroes deserve much more than the Commission called for, they are likely to get much less as long as the war continues and the conservative half of the country is not enlightened or "paid off."

We are likely to have more riots, and we may need them, if there is no other way to

alert the country to how desperately behind it is in attending to its severe social problems in general and those of Negro-Americans in particular. Unfortunately, riots have more political effect than Anti-Riot Commissions, at least of the kind over which McCone and Kerner presided.

A Personal P.S.: In social science circles it was long an open secret that the Commission discharged a good part of its social scientists, forced others to do a rush job, and that its writing staff did not have a chance to read much of what its research staff did find. Among others, Ernest Garvey (the pseudonym of a Congressional legislative assistant) wrote:

On December 14, it was suddenly announced that the [Commission] was advancing the date of its final report from July to March, and that most of the staff would no longer be retained. . . . Despite official explanations, it is no secret that the Commission [staff] had been hastily scrapped because the conclusions of the field level investigators were becoming increasingly incompatible with political realities as viewed from the White House. The younger staff wrote reports placing heavy blame on local police, criticizing the administration of federal programs and the magnitude of resources currently allotted to urban housing, jobs, welfare, education and poverty programs as totally inadequate. . . . The Commissioners, most of whom favored advancing the timetable, were totally unaware of the decision to give the staff notice. (*Commonweal*, January 12, 1968, p. 430)

When I referred to this short-changing of social science research by the Commission in a lecture at New Brunswick, John Leo, the indefatigable reporter for *The New York Times* shared my comments with the readers of his paper (January 27, 1968). The Commission did not refute that all its members were politicians and included not one social scientist, but it denied that it fired any of its staff. To this Prof. Gary Marx of Harvard countered, in a letter to the editor (*The New York Times*, February 7, 1968), that he was

one of those whose employment had been discontinued by the Commission. He added that the Commission's exclusion of social scientists was "a little like setting up a national commission to study cancer and then excluding doctors from it."

I believed this would settle the matter. But it did not. Roy Wilkins devoted his whole column to criticizing me for being critical of the report before I saw it (*The New York Post*, February 10, 1968). (He forgot that a social scientist may see things prematurely, as well as to mention that he himself was a member of the body he was shielding.) *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out in an editorial on March 4, 1968, after the publication of the Report, that

Columbia University sociologist Amitai Etzioni put it perfectly:

"The closest you can come to sociological dynamite is to promise people a Great Society and then deliver small handouts. If you were waiting a hundred years, were told that the promised land was just around the corner and then were given a few pieces of candy, you would be in the streets too."

Soon thereafter, the *Village Voice* devoted space to elaborating my views, in an interview with Kenneth Brodney (March 14, 1968). Then I received a call from a man doing a follow-up study on the Commission report; he told me of the Commission's plans and asked for my "off-hand reaction." While I much prefer to lend a hand than to be critical after the fact, I refused to react "off-hand;" this, I felt, was precisely a major flaw in the Commission's approach: too much "off-hand." I asked to see the plans. Soon there arrived in my office a three-page summary of "100 Days: A Supplementary Report to the National Advisory Committee." The summary has a summary (for those who cannot read three poorly populated pages). It states, in full:

Summary: "100 Days" is a plan for a national 100-day public educational crusade—a plan for enlisting the mass media in a summer-long campaign to put teeth in the Riot Commission's report.

The basic idea behind the plan is, I learned, to create more communication between blacks and whites, especially to communicate black feelings to white folks, as one way to keep the summer cool. (Hence, the "100 days.") Behind this idea is a widely held theory that increased communication has therapeutic effects. Several social scientists argued that increased contact breeds affinity and understanding. Actually the data suggests that this is so mainly among persons who are inclined to be friendly toward each other to begin with, and who are not divided by conflicting economic interests or basic value orientations. When contact is increased among partially hostile groups, whose interests conflict, they may become more aware of their differences and their conflicts may escalate.

Moreover, mass communication is a particularly ineffectual way to bring about accommodation. Numerous small face-to-face meetings of whites and blacks (maybe with a generous mixture of people trained in handling tense situations and keeping them therapeutic) are likely to be much more effective than TV speeches, although less headlines-producing.

Finally, communication without action follow-through is—especially under the circumstances—both dishonest and counterproductive. It "ventilates," "siphons off" tensions which should not be drained until legitimate demands are met. In order to help, communication should be geared to specific action. Thus, if an outpatient clinic in a slum is willing to improve its service, representatives of its clientele and community leaders may be called in and consulted. And this will be useful only to the extent those in power are willing to respond to legitimate demands and candidly turn down those which are not. It is both offensive and unwise to do otherwise. ◉

Editor's Note: This review was written prior to the announcement by Lyndon Johnson of his decision not to seek or accept nomination for President in 1968, and prior to the assassination in Memphis on April 4 of Martin Luther King, Jr.