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 primary 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.”

The report 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, the Commission suggests, should have top priority in the nation’s goals. 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 far 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 to be 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, “participation” are its main remedies. By the same token, the report subscribed to the goals of the Great Society, but obviously it is 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 within 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 societal 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, the left, as well as of black groupings. It rejects the charge
that the riots were the result of a conspiracy or planned agitation. It already has evoked the ire of the left by not seeing in the riots an "insurrection," the beginning of a revolutionary uprising of the "people." And, by calling for accelerated, effective desegregation (in addition to ghetto "enrichment" programs), it stands opposed to the separatist notions of black nationalists, who advocate their own versions of racist segregation.*

Nevertheless, the Commission failed in its prime mission, to provide an action plan, and achieved little in terms of its secondary assignment: education. Furthermore, its serious defects are not accidental, but constitutional. The report is very likely to remain a pile of 250,000 beautiful words which will generate little corrective action in the foreseeable future. The road to the hell of conservative status quo is paved with heavenly liberal rhetoric.

The Commission probably will have much less effect in educating the public than one would hope — especially in light of the phenomenal sale of the report in the first days after its publication. Prejudice and vested interests rarely give way to paperbacks. The Commission's failure arises from the way it and other similar commissions are set up and operate.

THE PRIME MISSION: A PLAN OF ACTION

The task the Commission failed to carry out is best understood in the historical context in which it was established. The national situation was no longer simply one of contending with a large, underprivileged, discriminated against, increasingly black under-class; this problem has been with us for ades, if not for generations. What the country facing was a large status group being mobilized collective action.

The new mobilization is in part due to changed background conditions; e.g., the slow but spread of education among Negroes and gains in organizational skills due to their high participation in World War II and in Vietnam. Mobilization is advanced also by deliberate of a large variety of political organizations the moderate Urban League to the extreme Nationalists. Sociologists have long ago estab that broadly based uprisings occur not among the most deprived and alienated, but typically groups which have gained a measure of organization, often after their conditions have improved at first (causing rising aspirations) then further improvement is blocked or down.

In the 1964-1966 period the society didn't increase Negro hopes. An unusually liberal Co. (thanks to the anti-Goldwater 1964 landslide) a slate of civil rights, anti-poverty, welfare and domestic reform bills which at the time seemed to initiate the societal transformation for which Negro-Americans hoped. Much more than the reforms initiated were the promise President Johnson's speeches at the time — at University for instance — detailed in pow- nguage the cruel injustices that society has on the Negro. He spoke, on June 5, 1965, right to share, share fully, and equally in society." This was not enough, he stated. It's not just legal equity but human ability, equality as a right and theory but equality and equality as a result." He concluded: "You tonight that this will be a chief goal of administra and of my program next year and the years to come."

But numerous other speeches and promises followed by rather little action on the front. Resources were deflected and the ment's attention was increasingly absorbed by Vietnam War. Despite repeated assertions United States is rich enough to have both butter, the country spent more in Saigon alone in all American cities combined. The war per annum total $24.5 billion by govern- estimates, $32 billion by U.S. Senate sources on poverty is funded at approximately a year.

This was the background for the severity 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 aimed at control of rats in slums, welfare for poor and children, and the Job Corps. Meanwhile, National Guards have purchased more new arms.

The White House responded to the riots by cal for a national day of prayer and by appointing the Commission on Civil Disorders. As James Resto
out at the time, this was an attempt to
the politics of the situation rather than the
itself. Appointing the Commission implied
and was needed before we could act, and
led the political leadership to claim that
not neglecting the issue, while still in effect
nothing.

The Commission has delivered its report,
was expected—there is in it much that is
ut very little new in the Commission’s analysis
even less in its recommendations. There is no
that the President, who appointed the Com-
on presumably to inform himself of what is to
one, intends to implement its major recommen-
dments.

The Commission did not accept a “task force”
ment, that of finding specific programs which
be realistically implemented in 1968 America.
commission’s almost complete disregard of the
for its recommendations to be endorsed and
entended under the present political contin-
can be seen in its failure to provide even an
estimate of the costs which the programs
icates would incur, and to indicate from where
funds might come.

ous estimates by other sources of the expendi-
volved suggest that scores of billions would
quired. George Mahon, chairman of the House
Committee on Ways and Means, estimated that “If you
got to tackling this thing, $100 billion wouldn’t
it far.” (A small income-supplementation pro-
much smaller than the one of the Commission
takes into account the relative costs of des-
items on a long list of desired re-
would cost $9 billion a year.)
entire approach makes sense only if the war
is terminated and the funds budgeted
are fully assigned to the domestic front, or
are raised very substantially. This point the
vice likely Commission did not make.

The Commission’s lack of interest in the ways
recommendations might become public
policy also can be seen in the way it formulated
osals. Anyone concerned with implementa-
will be willing to formulate a program so as
mere elicit a swell of applause on Sunday
ognored on Monday, but in such a way broad-
sal support will be mobilized. I am not sug-
ging, of course, that the program should be
ted to suit existing misconceptions of opposing
destinct interests, but that in choice of labels, for-
and details of the programs will be made in
accommodate as many “friendly” forces as
le, and win over at the same time some waver-
ners.

may even be necessary to provide some in-
ments for groups which are less deserving than
egro or poor, but whose support is essential
annot be assured otherwise. The Commission
very little taste for such an approach. Typical-
advocates a version of the negative income tax
ach to the relief of poverty and a deprivation
ach which is very unpopular with politicians
ers. This is both because it smacks of sub-
ing those who do not wish to work and because

it provides income benefits only for the underclass.
The Commission seems not to have even con-
sidered an alternative approach—that of family al-
allowance—which is used successfully in Canada,
Britain and Scandinavia. This program is built around
support for children; it provides some allowances
for all children, but particularly helps the poor (in-
cluding Negroes as well as many of the most die-
hard white segregationists). The program effect is
slanted in favor of the lower classes even though
each child receives the same amount of support be-
cause much of the allowance given to the affluent
classes is taxed back. The same a-political wishful
thinking marks many of the Commission’s other
recommendations.

A SECONDARY MISSION: PUBLIC EDUCATION?

he Commission may be said to have deliberate-
ly focused on a different mission, one that was
not explicitly assigned, but which could be
legitimately construed as one of its “latent func-
tions”: public education. Its strong rhetoric and
weeping suggestions might be said to have opened
the way to more moderate action by alerting people
to 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 deep and 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.

The Commission—for a moment at least—perhaps
has rekindled the hopes of the Negro: hopes that the white community will see the true dimensions of the crisis and act accordingly. But 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 thus is 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 some time, but time is now running out. Yet it is but words, and 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 gnawing gaps which soon again will be displayed in all their nakedness.

* 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.

...signed to paper over gnawing gaps which soon again will be displayed in all their nakedness.

...What was needed 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 to find the optimal programs that the President and concerned congressmen will support. Strategy must be formulated which would make the new programs as widely acceptable as possible, providing pay-offs were necessary making them tolerable to forces which otherwise would be sure to block them.

Such an approach may be resented by citizens already convinced about the need to act drastically in favor of the under-class. Nevertheless, 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 or an inter-agency executive task force. The commission’s membership was made up of 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 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. In fact, we may need them if there is no other way to alert the country to how desperately far behind it is in attending to the severe social problems in general, and those of Negro-Americans in particular. Unfortunately, riots have more political effects than Anti-Riot Commissions—at least of the kind over which McCone and Kerner presided.
A hundred dreams, and yet that night they slept up on the hill, where the mosquitoes bit the Caribbean wind. Next month, they steal an entire continent, but tonight they lay aside their swords, thick cotton armor and a scheme of gold, and sleep with Spanish waves in ears, with winds from Pyrenees fanning in their hair. All around that hill, four thousand Indians gather (so they say), and in the sparkle of first light, the chant begins, the drums will roll a military threat no ears can fail to hear in dreams.

The day and night have stopped. The dream alone remains, stiff as masts before the breeze, full as sails absorbing all Castilian winds at once. Now the question's simply one of pause, how there could be these several hours of quiet in a storm that shook the bounty from the main. Now nothing's more severe than one mosquito who has braved the higher air, a minute before dawn, in the quiet of the lethal sky, he hums a hungry tune, settles on an oily neck and, one moment later, is slapped to death.

—NORMAN MEINKE