



Kerner @ 50: Communication and the Politics of Race in the United States

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Kerner @ 50:**Communication and the Politics of Race in the United States**

In March 1968, following a year of violent urban rebellions, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders concluded that the United States was “moving toward two societies, one Black, one White – separate and unequal” (Kerner Report, 1988, p. 1). With a team of researchers, the 11-member¹ Kerner Commission, named for its chairman Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois, had spent a year studying the causes of those racial disorders in 23 cities. Segregation and discrimination had long been part of American life, and the resulting poverty had created urban ghettos completely unknown to most Americans, the report said. Though the commission’s work had been comprehensive in examining causes, it would lay blame for national ignorance at the feet of the news media for their unbalanced coverage and hiring practices. The Kerner Report faulted the media for their almost entirely White reporters and editors who collectively had failed to report adequately on race relations, particularly omitting the difficulties experienced by those in inner cities. Bad policing practices, a flawed justice system, unscrupulous consumer credit practices, poor or inadequate housing, high unemployment, voter suppression, and other culturally embedded forms of racial discrimination also converged to propel violent upheaval on the streets of African-American neighborhoods in U.S. cities, north and south, east and west. And as Black unrest arose, inadequately trained police officers and National Guard troops entered affected neighborhoods, often worsening the violence (George, 2018).

Many, including the President Lyndon B. Johnson who had carefully assembled that commission, had expected a different set of explanations than structural racism, as many fingers had pointed at so-called trouble-makers, outside agitators and Communists. Not so, the

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2
3 commission said, citing more endemic societal factors that included institutionalized White
4 racism that had economically and politically marginalized Black citizens and a criminal justice
5 system that treated Blacks more severely. The commission had thought the complicity of news
6 coverage to be a serious enough matter to single it out for an entire chapter and set of
7 recommendations.
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14 Chapter 15, “The News Media and the Disorders,” which has become a classic in
15 journalism studies over the decades, remains relevant in the present moment of history in which
16 race relations have once again arisen in the media spotlight. Based on extensive analysis of
17 newspaper and television coverage, Chapter 15 had pointed out an “imbalance between reality
18 and impression,” in news coverage of the violence and protests, as well as in how newspapers
19 and broadcast companies had reported on African Americans “day by day and month by month,
20 year in and year out” (Kerner Report, 1968, p. 363). The public was seeing a fragmented picture
21 of race in America, the report said, one that failed to show the everyday lives of African
22 Americans or their commonalities with the rest of society. Reporting, the commission found, had
23 minimized disparities in education, housing, employment, income, health, policing and other
24 areas of life that had created a Black underclass in the United States. Among the commission’s
25 recommendations were for mainstream newsrooms to expand hiring of Black reporters, to
26 consult regularly with the editors of Black newspapers to gain familiarity with issues and leaders
27 in their communities, and to establish training programs toward creation of a more diverse news
28 force.
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49 This special issue of the *Howard Journal of Communications* highlights critical issues
50 related to media coverage of race in America over the last half-century since the release of the
51 Kerner Report in February 1968. In this overview, we focus on media reactions to the original
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3 report, as well as media attention related to the present day 50th anniversary of the report's
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5 publication. Among the issues that arose in the original reporting was the stance that President
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7 Johnson took toward the report's findings. These and other issues related to the Kerner Report
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9 are explored through the writings of both scholars and media practitioners who seek to assess the
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11 historical impact of the Kerner Report as well as its relevance today and tomorrow, in light of
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13 political, social and other shifts.
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17 This includes a rare examination of the role of Historically Black Colleges and
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19 Universities (HBCUs), which responded to the report's recommendation that "training programs
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21 should be started in high schools and intensified at colleges" (Kerner Report, 1968, p. 385). In
22
23 the journalism world of 1968, mostly White newsrooms would thus be diversified racially, as
24
25 "summer vacation and part-time editorial jobs, coupled with offers of permanent employment,"
26
27 would awaken career plans (Kerner Report, 1968, p. 385). Commentaries from professional
28
29 journalists explore the ebb and flow of race coverage since Kerner and initial efforts to fulfill the
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31 recommendation for training programs to increase the number of black journalists. Another
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33 submission, "The 'Correct' Perspective," focuses on the cultural competency of reporters
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35 covering stories dealing with race and ethnicity as well as the debate over the age-old question
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37 "Are you Black first or a journalist first?"
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45 THE VIEW FROM THE WHITE HOUSE

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47 When President Johnson signed the order establishing the National Commission on Civil
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49 Disorders in 1967, he observed that "no society can tolerate massive violence, any more than a
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51 body can tolerate massive disease. He vowed that "we in America shall not tolerate it" (Johnson,
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53 1967). Johnson was alarmed by the violence and destruction that had erupted in more than 100
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3 cities across the nation, beginning with the Watts riot in Los Angeles in 1965. The majority of
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5 the violence occurred in 1967, with the worst of these in Detroit, where five days of rioting left
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7 33 Blacks and 10 Whites dead and property damage at more than \$100 million (Bates, 2018).
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10 Johnson had charged the commission with answering three questions with regard to the
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12 violence:
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- 14 1. “What happened?”
- 15 2. Why did it happen?
- 16 3. What can be done to prevent it from happening again and again (Johnson, 1967)?”

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21 Former *New York Times* reporter Tom Wicker later said that President Johnson had been
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23 “severely criticized” for the moderate composition of the commission. “Where, the critics
24
25 demanded, were [Black activists] Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissick, Martin Luther King,
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27 such White radicals as Tom Hayden or such fiery evangelists as James Baldwin” (Kerner Report,
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29 1968, p. v.). Despite its intentionally moderate makeup, the commission would turn out to be
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31 more independent than Johnson had desired, making broader and potentially more costly
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33 recommendations. In addition, the commission would be bold in its conclusions, placing the
34
35 blame for the riots squarely on institutionalized White racism at a time when Johnson was
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37 attempting to encourage and not antagonize White Americans. What needled him most, however,
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39 was targeting the very disparities that he was attempting to fight in his war on poverty without
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41 giving him the level of credit he felt he deserved for what he had accomplished thus far. While
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43 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom Johnson emulated, had his New Deal, LBJ had his Great
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45 Society — the cornerstone of the socio-economic revolution that he envisioned as part of his
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47 legacy. Great Society initiatives would eventually include the Voting Rights Act, Medicare and
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49 Medicaid, the Fair Housing Act, Head Start, food stamps, the Freedom of Information Act and
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3 the appointment of Thurgood Marshall as the first African American to the U.S. Supreme Court
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5 (Johnson, 1967; Califano, 1991, pp. 355-358).
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8 Ascending to the presidency after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November
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10 1963, the former vice president pushed his Great Society agenda against a backdrop of the
11
12 Vietnam War and rebellionsⁱⁱ from coast to coast. Two weeks after Johnson signed the Civil
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14 Rights Act of 1964, uprisings spread from Harlem to the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of
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16 Brooklyn. They erupted in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965; in about a half-dozen cities,
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18 from Cleveland to Omaha in 1966; and in the end, more than 100 cities, most notably Detroit and
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20 Newark, in 1967 — a month after the president nominated Thurgood Marshall to become the
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22 first African American on the U.S. Supreme Court (Califano, 1991, p. 207). According to Joseph
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24 A. Califano Jr., Johnson's special assistant and the former secretary of the Department of Health,
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26 Education and Welfare during the Carter administration, the president "feared that the reforms to
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28 Education and Welfare during the Carter administration, the president "feared that the reforms to
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30 which he had dedicated his presidency were in mortal danger, not only from those who opposed
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32 them, but from those he was trying to help" (Califano, 1991, p. 52).
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36 Johnson's fears came true almost as soon as the commission completed the report. He
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38 had initially planned to thank the commission and accept the report during a customary
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40 presidential ceremony on March 1, 1968 (Gillon, 2018, p. 248). However, the Kerner
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42 recommendations had been leaked to the *Los Angeles Times*, which published an article on
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44 February 25, and the full report to the *Washington Post*, a week ahead of the embargo that
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46 restricted publication or broadcast, and before the president had a chance to read it (Gillon, 2018,
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48 p. 250). Johnson was livid and headed to his ranch in Texas, ignoring the commission, its report,
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50 and appeals from his inner circle to acknowledge both. The public and the press also awaited
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52 reaction from the president. "I'm shocked that President Johnson, in five major speeches over the
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3 weekend since the report was issued, apparently did not consider it of sufficient importance to
4 mention it even once — although he discussed some \$15.6 billion for a variety of other
5 programs,” Manhattan Borough President Percy E. Sutton said in an interview with the *New York*
6 *Amsterdam News* (“What You Say,” 1968, p. 38). Max Frankel had similar observations in his
7 *New York Times* article. “Johnson sits silent and his official spokesmen keep weaving, ducking
8 and dodging,” Frankel said. “Doesn’t it seem strange with all this attention focused on a report
9 by the president’s own commission, that Johnson himself has made no comment (Gillon, 2018,
10 p. 256)?”
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22 Finally, on March 22, nearly a month after the report’s release, President Johnson
23 responded during a news conference. The next day, the news media reported the president had
24 “praised” the report even though he committed himself to none of the recommendations (Harach
25 2008, p. 204). Behind the scenes, Johnson expressed his dismay with the report, which he
26 thought had ignored his administration’s accomplishments in addressing inequality and fell short
27 on how to pay for the commission’s recommendations. Johnson also believed that New York
28 City Mayor John Lindsey, vice chair of the commission, had imposed his own liberal will and
29 views on the commission (Graham, 2017).
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40 While President Johnson took a measured response to the report publicly, his vice
41 president, Hubert Humphrey, made a stronger statement in a speech at Florida State University,
42 prompting a rebuke from his boss. “If this nation can afford to spend \$30 billion to put a man on
43 the moon, it can afford to spend what it takes to put a man on his feet right here on earth,”
44 Humphrey said. “It’s not enough just to open the doors. You also have to help the people walk
45 through those doors” (Odum-Hinmon 2005, pp. 254-55).
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3 Known for being mercurial, Johnson's words and actions were sometimes contradictory.
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5 "He could be altruistic and petty, caring and crude, generous and petulant, bluntly honest and
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7 calculatingly devious — all within the same few minutes," Califano said (1991, 2015, p. xxxvi).
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9 Johnson once compared demonstrators to the Ku Klux Klan. "A rioter with a Molotov cocktail in
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11 his hands is not fighting for civil rights any more than a Klansman with a sheet on his back and a
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13 mask on his face," Johnson said following the Watts rebellion. Johnson called both "lawbreakers,
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15 destroyers of constitutional rights and liberties, and ultimately destroyers of a free America"
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17 (Califano, 1991, p. 53). After the Kerner report's release, he belittled African Americans while
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19 encouraging the heads of Ford, Coca-Cola and other corporations in the newly formed National
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21 Alliance of Businessmen to offer more jobs. Johnson said in part:
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26 What works best is what you do best: on-the-job training. Unemployment is down
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28 to 3.7%. We're faced with the hard-core unemployed. You all are going to have to
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30 teach them how to wash and stay clean, how to read, how to write. All the things
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32 everyone around this table got from their mommies and daddies. Only these
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34 people don't have mommies and daddies who give a damn about them. Or if they
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36 do, those mommies and daddies can't read or don't know how to help them. So
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38 you're going to have to wake them up in the morning, because they've never had
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40 anything worth getting up for before. Then you're going to have to scrub them.
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43 (Califano, 1991, p. 224)
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47 "If they're working, they won't be throwing bombs in your homes and plants," Johnson
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49 told the executives. "Keep them busy, and they won't have time to burn your cars" (Califano,
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51 1991, p. 225).
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MEDIA REACTION

The Kerner report was treated as breaking news, receiving widespread and generally positive coverage. The report made news everywhere: in daily newspapers, in the Black Press, in magazines, on radio and on television, including “Meet the Press” and other mainstream public affairs programs. The coverage stirred public interest nationwide, as many citizens and policymakers sought out their own copies of the report and pored over every word, making it a best-seller. Bantam Books sold more than 740,000 paperback versions of the report in 11 days (Harach 2008, p. 210). Once the report was leaked, the White House decided to make it more widely available so that the *Washington Post* would not have an exclusive. The *Post*'s position was that it did not break the embargo, because it received the report through other means with a missing cover and no embargo statement. Speeding up the release date, however, meant that journalists had to scramble to remain competitive with no real time to digest the full report before publicizing it (Califano, 1991, p. 262; Harach 2008, p. 202-203). The initial coverage focused heavily on the summary and recommendations, highlighting racism and disparities. Some stories mentioned the media criticism, but others did not and ignored Chapter 15. In the first of its four front-page articles, “Riot Report to Stress Racism,” the *Washington Post* simply said that “there is expected to be criticism of . . . the news media for some of their riot coverage” (Harach 2008, p. 202). The *New York Times* went further, providing a more comprehensive report on the recommendations overall, including the following on the media:

The commission charged that some newspapers and radio and television stations so badly portrayed the scale and character of the violence that “the overall effect was . . . an exaggeration of both mood and event.” (Herbers, 1968, p. 1, 20-22).

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3 The commission credited news media “on the whole” with trying to give a
4 balanced report of the summer unrest. But, the commission added, “important
5 segments . . . failed to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil
6 disorders and on the underlying problems of race relations” (Herbers, 1968, p. 1,
7 20-22).

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16 The *Los Angeles Times* ran the headline “City Riots Laid to White Racism” on its
17 front page. The *Boston Globe* published 20 articles on March 1. “All three major
18 television networks pre-empted regular programming on March 3 to offer reporting and
19 analysis of the report,” Harach said. “In a move that seemed to show the immediate
20 impact of the news media chapter, both NBC and CBS aired competing documentaries
21 that examined the issues of race and poverty” (Hrach, 2008, p. 206). News organizations
22 and trade publications heeded the media criticism, airing and publishing special reports
23 on race for months after release of the commission’s findings.

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35 However, the editor of the *Baltimore News American* wasn’t as receptive. “We
36 are always ready to listen to intelligent comment and suggestion, but not to such windy
37 absurdities,” he said (Hrach, 2008 p. 14). Conservative news organizations scoffed at the
38 blame on White racism and complained that rioters were let off the hook. “Whodunit?
39 Whitey, Of Course” read the headline on an editorial in Alabama’s *Montgomery*
40 *Advertiser*. The *Times-Democrat*, which covered part of the Iowa-Illinois border,
41 editorialized that the report was a “blatant political payoff” for Kerner’s appointment as a
42 federal judge. (Hrach, 2008 p. 65).

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3 In the Black Press, coverage was mixed, even though some Black leaders like Rev.
4 Martin Luther King, Jr. had celebrated the report's findings. King had used those findings to
5 observe that there was "a national emergency . . . perpetrated daily by racism in our society."
6 He noted that children were condemned to attend schools that were full of disorder and neglect
7 and that the lives, incomes and well-being of poor people everywhere in America were
8 threatened by our economic system (Wessel-McCoy, 2018). King understood that such
9 conditions created the context for violence, but he disagreed with the report's claim that funding
10 of neighborhood programs would be enough to end those conditions. The Poor People's
11 Campaign that King was organizing was aimed at coalescing poor people of color in both rural
12 and urban areas to transform a society that he said was structured around racism, economic
13 exploitation and militarism (Wessel-McCoy, 2018).
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28 In a meeting with Black Press editors and publishers, President Johnson said that the
29 Kerner Report had "more good than bad," calling it the "most important report made to me since
30 I have been president." The bad, he said, was the lack of a funding plan for the commission's
31 recommendations. "It's like saying we need sirloin steaks three nights a week, but only have the
32 money to pay for two steaks" (Gillon, 2018, p. 259). A number of Black newspapers, such as the
33 *New York Amsterdam News* ("What You Say," 1968, p. 38), and the people whom they
34 interviewed said that the Kerner Report didn't tell them anything new and simply mirrored their
35 words and thoughts. Some people were glad to hear "official" acknowledgement of their plight
36 and the racism that contributed to it. However, the *Chicago Daily Defender* criticized the
37 commission for failing to acknowledge what the local government and community leaders were
38 doing "to improve conditions in the Black ghettos," as well as what Black businesses had
39 accomplished. "This city's arduous and successful labor in the prevention of riots could have
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3 been pegged as a shining example for other metropolitan centers to follow,” the paper wrote
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5 (Sengstacke, 1968, p. 13). The *Defender* later described the report as “a classic document that
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7 awakened the nation to the sins of racism” in an editorial defending Kerner after his conviction
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9 on corruption charges in February 1973 (Harach, 2008 p. 68).
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12 The *Atlanta Daily World*, headquartered in a city that was spared the devastation
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14 experienced in other metropolitan areas, denounced violence and supported the Kerner
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16 Commission at the outset. “These riots call for a strong denunciation by our leaders, because
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18 they do no good and cause tremendous loss and damage to innocent citizens,” the paper wrote in
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20 an editorial on July 27, 1967, commending leaders who had deemed the violence unproductive.
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22 The next day’s paper featured a front-page story noting that President Johnson had established
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24 the commission and called for a day of prayer (Odum-Hinmon 2005, p. 251) — a move that
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26 Califano feared would be deemed as being insignificant (1991, p. 217). When the report came
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28 out, the *Atlanta Daily World* outlined some of the recommendations and said that “the best
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30 interest of our nation lies in the races cooperating and working for mutual understanding”
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32 (Gillon, 2018, pp. 251, 255-256). An editorial in Norfolk’s *Journal and Guide* stated that the
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34 nation is “indebted” to the Kerner commissioners and their courage to “tell it like it is.” The
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36 paper noted that after the report’s release, the U.S. Senate broke a filibuster and finally voted on
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38 the civil rights bill. It expressed little optimism for any real movement in Congress on the Kerner
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40 recommendations and decried the backlash around the country saying that:
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46 America is at the crossroads; its destiny hinges upon its acknowledgment of the
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48 simple truth that today’s problems are the culmination of 300 years of abuse,
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50 indifference and suppression ventured upon a race of people who, in spite of it all,
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3 has endured, until the breaking point, man's inhumanity to man. (Telling it like it
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5 is, 1968, p. A10)

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7 The *Cleveland Call and Post* ran the entire statement of praise from the U.S. Commission
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9 on Civil Rights, whose signatories included Eugene Patterson, vice chairman and editor of the
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11 *Atlanta Constitution* (U.S. rights body, 1968). The *Los Angeles Sentinel* described the Kerner
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13 Report as "a scathing 250,000-word 'white paper' on the nation's No. 1 domestic problem." It
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15 stated that the report contained two surprises — the references to White racism and the findings
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17 that there was no conspiracy. "We believe the total White community, inside and outside major
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19 cities, in small town and villages, must rise up to the occasion and cure the tragic inequalities,"
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21 the *Sentinel* concluded in its editorial. "It can be done, and must be done" (Riot "White paper,"
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23 1968, p. A6). The *Philadelphia Tribune* also ran an article that was prescriptive. The article
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25 focused on a meeting on the Kerner Report where topics included a moral challenge for Whites
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27 to rethink racist acts and views, plans to improve police-community relations and appeals to
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29 support King's forthcoming Poor People's March on Washington. "Either support non-violent
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31 protests or face guerilla warfare," warned Richard Taylor of the Southern Christian Leadership
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33 Conference (Commissioner says, 1968, p. 5). An economic development manager issued a
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35 similar warning in another story on the same page. She said that it might take riots to bring
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37 "meaningful programs" to help Philadelphia's hard-core unemployed (Social worker fears, 1968,
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39 p. 5).

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42 By June and after more riots following King's assassination in early April, the *New*
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44 *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that "the Kerner Report has made it respectable to describe this
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46 society's major ailment as White racism — a terms viewed as too militant and inflammatory
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48 only a few months ago" (1968, p. 16). But in July, Whitney M. Young Jr. was asking, "What
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3 ever happened to the Kerner Commission report?” In an opinion piece in Norfolk’s *Journal and*
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5 *Guide*, the National Urban League executive director said, “The very fact that the Kerner
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7 Commission report has not been implemented shows that the nation doesn’t have the will to act
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9 to end the effects of racism.” Young concluded by saying that “the blueprint for change offered
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11 by the Kerner Commission report gathers dust on the shelves” (1968, pp. 6-7).
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15 However, other Black leaders like Bayard Rustin, H. Rap Brown and James Farmerⁱⁱⁱ
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17 said the Kerner recommendations weren’t novel and didn’t go far enough (Gillon, 2018). Kwame
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19 Holmes, an assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado in Boulder, made
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21 similar complaints and outlined what he considered to be glaring omissions in an essay titled
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23 “Beyond the Flames.” In discussing the riots and underlying causes, “the report fails to
24
25 illuminate the sexual politics of ghettoization, leaving out a critical part of the emotional history
26
27 of these events ... with no references to black women as victims of police violence” (Holmes,
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29 2016, p. 307). This was also true for the LGBTQ communities, Holmes said. In addition to the
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31 Kerner Commission, he also blamed the media as well as the Civil Rights and Black Power
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33 movements.
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38 “Sex and gender violence as community problems went unmentioned, because they were
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40 not considered racial matters,” said Mary Frances Berry, Ph.D., former chair of the U.S. Civil
41
42 Rights Commission, who is the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and
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44 Professor of History and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania (Berry, 2018, p. 16).
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48 “The Kerner Commission did not address police sexual abuse of Black women and girls
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50 in Detroit and other cities as a source of the anger that helped to fuel women’s participation in
51
52 the riots,” Berry wrote in a 50th anniversary retrospective for the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine.
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54 “This was a #MeToo moment long before the #MeToo movement,” she said (Berry, 2018, p.17),
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3 referring to the campaign by women to identify and report sexual harassers, which was launched
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5 by an African-American woman, Tarana Burke, in 2006, but which went viral in 2017 after more
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7 than a dozen women reported harassment by media mogul Harvey Weinstein. Similar allegations
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9 against other powerful men followed (Parker, 2017).
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14 15 THE NEXT 50 YEARS AND BEYOND

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17 During the half-century since the release of the Kerner Report, successive generations of news
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19 leaders have tried and failed to reach industry goals of parity in making mainstream newsrooms
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21 reflect the country's demographics. Some studies show that neither have those media yet been
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23 able to cover race matters adequately in a nation experiencing an ongoing "browning of
24
25 America" and the emergence of a new era of race-related civil unrest and violence.
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29 In this journal's special section a decade ago, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the
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31 Kerner Report, Byerly and Wilson (2009) observed that a vastly conglomerated news industry, a
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33 decline in the number of non-White reporters since the 1970s, and the eroding credibility of the
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35 press (at that time) presented the journalism community with a complex set of problems. The
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37 number of non-White journalists continues to be low, as shown by the American Society of
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39 News Editors (ASNE) annual Newsroom Diversity Surveys. In 2017, only 16.6% of the total
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41 workforce in 661 U.S. news organizations surveyed (including newspapers and online
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43 companies) were non-White. That figure was higher at 24.3% for the online organizations
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45 (ASNE, 2017). Still, neither figure comes close to representing the 40% of the U.S. who claim
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47 Black, Hispanic and other non-White identity (U.S. Census, 2017).
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51 The 2017 ASNE study showed that only a handful of newspapers are at or near parity.
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53 However, some papers had a low target to hit, such as the *Villages Daily Sun* in Florida, which is
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3 in a city that is 97% White (U.S. Census, 2017). A few papers achieved parity based on their
4 total coverage area, but not on the cities where they are based. The newsroom at the *Minneapolis*
5 *Star Tribune*, for example, is on par with the state of Minnesota, which has a Black population of
6 6% — three times lower than the city's 18.6% (U.S. Census, 2017).
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12 The Kerner Report's Chapter 15, which implicated the news media in keeping a majority
13 of Americans ignorant of the deep distress among residents of inner cities, and then
14 misrepresenting their violent rebellions against it, still seemingly characterizes journalism today.
15 Research shows that half of the people in the United States presently still get their news from
16 television (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017), but the overwhelming number of White mainstream
17 journalists employed by news outlets may still be engaging in misrepresenting and
18 underrepresenting what people of color experience in their communities in both TV and other
19 news. This is seen particularly in dramatic news featuring crime and natural disasters. Sonnett,
20 Johnson and Dolan (2015) noted that at the time of Hurricane Katrina in 2004, only 3.7% of
21 television journalists were non-White, and they posited this as the likely reason that the coverage
22 of that deadly event in the U.S. Gulf Coast, as shown on Fox, CNN and CBS, had demonstrated
23 implicit racism in its news. Their study had found most reporters to be White males, and most of
24 the stories to focus on White rescuers and Black victims in New Orleans (e.g., through arrival of
25 the National Guard to save the desperate people), and on restoring law and order (e.g.,
26 restraining African Americans characterized as looters and thieves).
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47 Moreover, even those journalists of color who are positioned to cover these events say
48 they are not always free to incorporate perspectives from the communities they cover. For
49 example, Hopkinson and Somani (2018), who examined the experiences of 23 Black journalists
50 (roughly even numbers of men and women) in broadcast news, sought to learn to what extent
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3 those journalists felt they were able to represent Black culture in their reporting, and whether
4 they felt pressure to conform to White cultural aesthetics either personally or in their journalism.
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6 They found that at some network television stations, some biases against Black journalists still
7 exist in expectations that they conform to White standards in their looks (especially in not
8 wearing “Black” hair styles) and in their journalism. Several interviewed said they had been
9 complimented for achieving this standard with comments from supervisors and colleagues like
10 “You’re like a very ‘White Black person’” and “You’re the Whitest Black girl I know” (p. 7). In
11 spite of these limitations, participants conveyed their determination to avoid stereotypes in their
12 stories, and to seek out non-White sources when possible (Somani & Hopkinson, 2018).
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16 This last point brings back to mind the historical role of the Black Press and ethnic media
17 which the Kerner Report emphasized as key to informing the public about the broader reality of
18 growing numbers of non-white people in a rapidly diversifying nation (Byerly & Wilson, 2009,
19 p. 218). The Kerner Commission had recommended that the still mostly White-owned and
20 operated mainstream news media seek the guidance of African-American editors in developing
21 greater familiarity with non-White communities and expanding news coverage. That same
22 commission advocated for journalism programs to recruit African American (and by extension,
23 other people of color) into their programs and to train them in public affairs reporting. While
24 some universities have taken this task on, the work of educating the next generation of minority
25 journalists has fallen strongly on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), as
26 [AUTHOR] explores in her article in this special issue.
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30 There has never been a historical moment more in demand of racial and ethnic diversity
31 in the journalism workforce. “It matters on each and every story; your coverage is informed by
32 who you are, by where you’ve been, by the things that you are passionate about,” *Detroit Free*
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3 *Press* columnist Rochelle Riley said during a *Kerner Plus 40* Journalists Roundtable. “If you
4 don’t have enough different people, then the values are the same, the stories are the same and the
5 pictures don’t reflect the world in which we live” (Wickham & Zuberi, 2008, p. 84).
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10 While much scholarly attention has been given to the importance of Black-White issues
11 in journalism (and in reporters), West (2011) focused on news about Latin America (and Latin
12 Americans) as immigration policy debates escalate. This researcher pointed out that historically,
13 news has focused on the costs of immigration instead of the benefits, and pointed out other
14 downsides, such as “illegals taking government benefits,” difficulties in patrolling the borders
15 and crime associated with immigrants (pp. 65-66). Citing the way that journalism can shape
16 public debate around policy, West argues that “what is needed today is a new reporting narrative
17 that recognizes the ‘brain gain’ America has received from immigration” (p. 68). This also
18 applies to immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa who have been covered unevenly.
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31 Veteran journalist Paul Delaney also laments that so much is still needed today. “I cite
32 my career in journalism, particularly my work in affirmative action, as living example of the
33 contortions that the battles to break down racial and racist barriers have gone through the past
34 few decades,” Delaney wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (2017).
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40 “Prior to the 1960s, American newsrooms were almost 100% White and predominantly
41 male,” Delaney said. “When I graduated from Ohio State University in 1958, I wrote to 50 daily
42 newspapers. Only two responded, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and West Virginia’s *Charleston*
43 *Gazette*, with courteous rejections saying they were not ready to hire Negroes” (Delaney, 2018).
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49 Delaney, who started his journalism career in the Black Press at the *Atlanta Daily World*,
50 became the first Black reporter at the *Dayton Daily News* in 1963. He then spent four years at the
51 *Washington Evening Star* before joining the *New York Times* in 1969. He rose to top editing
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3 ranks at the *Times* and was instrumental in recruiting and retaining journalists of color. However,
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5 he believes that diversity efforts never really gained traction there or elsewhere in journalism.
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7 “My humble opinion was that Whites cannot get over their Whiteness and being in charge, and
8
9 believe that non-Whites just cannot cut it competing with them,” said Delaney (2018), who also
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11 served as journalism chair at the University of Alabama before retiring.
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15 Delaney reflects, “I, for one, never dreamed my chosen profession would be confronting
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17 the exact same racial issues in the 21st century as it did in mid-20th century and earlier periods”
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19 (Delaney, 2017).
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13 ⁱMembers of the commission included Otto Kerner, chair, governor of Illinois; John V. Lindsay, mayor of New
14 York City; Fred R. Harris, U.S. senator, Oklahoma; Edward W. Brooke, U.S. senator, Massachusetts; James C.
15 Corman, U. S. representative, 22nd District, California; William M. McCulloch, U. S. representative, 4th District,
16 Ohio; I. W. Abel, president, United Steelworkers of America (AFL-CIO); Charles B. Thornton, chairman and chief
17 executive officer, Litton Industries, Inc.; Roy Wilkins, executive director, National Association for the
18 Advancement of Colored People; Katherine Graham Peden, commissioner of commerce, Kentucky; Herbert Jenkins,
19 chief of police, Atlanta, Georgia.

20 ⁱⁱRebellions were of several kinds, with the largest being anti-war and racial justice movements, the latter including
21 protests in poverty-ridden inner cities and the formation of race-based resistance groups like the Young Lords and
22 Black Panthers.

23 ⁱⁱⁱThe Black leaders cited in this passage include Bayard Rustin, a civil rights activist and key adviser to the Rev.
24 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; H. Rap Brown, aka Jamil Abdullah Al-Ami, chairman of the Student Non-Violent
25 Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1967 to 1968; and James Farmer, co-founder and chairman of the Congress
26 for Racial Equality (CORE), who helped to launch the Freedom Rides in 1961.
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