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November 1969

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# A Postmortem Examination of the Kerner Commission Report : Discussion

**Keywords**

Commission, white, institutions, program, Kerner, WIN, Ford, Job Corps

**Comments**

Comments presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Economic Association, St. Louis, MO Volume 1  
- Paper #7

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Southern Economics Association  
St. Louis, Missouri  
November 14, 1969

A Postmortem Examination of the Kerner  
Commission Report: Discussion

Professor Ford has reviewed the Report of the Commission on Civil Disorders and has found it to be wanting. He cites as its specific deficiencies: (1) it did not provide cost estimates which precluded its use as a planning guide; (2) it neglected to consider the interaction of its piecemeal recommendations which permitted charges of redundancy; and (3) it failed to assign priorities which denied politicians a basis for compromise in the implementation of its recommendations. In addition, he charges that the Commission in general has failed to propose any remedies to meet the primary cause that it assigned for the civil disorders: "white racism." He says:

If, as Professor Briggs put it, the "main culprit" identified by the Commission is "white racism"--one searches the Report in vain for a program aimed directly at producing changes in attitudes toward the race question. (Emphasis is in the original text.)

Let me begin with the general issue. It is difficult--to put it mildly--to understand how one can conclude that the panoply of recommendations offered by the Commission represents a non sequitur from its causal premise. This accusation seriously misinterprets the entire goal of public policy in the equal opportunity area. Moreover, it mis-reads the indictment tendered by the Commission. The Report does not claim that all whites are racists and that the problem is one of

changing the collective attitudes of individual whites. Rather, the Commission concluded that it is the institutions that dominate our society--the corporations, the unions, the political parties, the employment service, the welfare boards, the school boards, the city councils, the police departments, and so on--which are controlled entirely by whites that are in need of drastic reform. In the precise words of the commission:

"What white Americans have never fully understood--but what the Negro can never forget--is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white institutions condone it." (Emphasis is my own).

Attitudes, on the other hand, can never be changed directly by legislative action or moral appeals; but behavior can. It is to this end that the Commission put forth its recommendations. Prejudice (i.e., attitudes) does not cause discrimination (behavior). It is discrimination that causes prejudice. When people find other people in a demeaning status, prejudices develop. The fundamental objective of all equal opportunity proposals is to halt discriminatory practices and, thus, indirectly seek to ameliorate prejudice. Thus, contrary to Professor Ford's general conclusion, the recommendations put forth by the Commission are entirely consistent with its premise that "white racism" is the "culprit." Institutional reforms are prescribed to overcome the overt and--more importantly--the covert discrimination of the white dominated institutions of our society. Hence, it is not surprising that one can "search" the entire volume and not find

any proposals for attitudinal changes. Individuals tend to reflect the normative values of their institutions; change the institutions and you can alter the attitudes of individuals. This is the message of the Kerner Commission.

Let us turn now to the specific criticisms. Professor Ford has calculated the costs of selected programs proposed by the Commission. He finds that the range for about 17 percent of the proposals is \$18-\$46 billion a year and that the total bill probably would be consistent with the \$80 billion figure that is popularly cited. I doubt that anyone would question his calculations. They all seem reasonable. It is not clear, however, what comes of action flows from this finding. Everyone knew that the enactment of all-or any sizeable proportion--of the proposals would be costly. The Commission outlined what it believed to be needed, not what it thought was economically or politically attainable. Perhaps this was stupid. But, one does not realistically propose that a single fire engine be sent to a ten alarm fire. It would be just as wise to do nothing as to expect meaningful results from a vain effort. It would be wiser to propose that every resource available be marshalled with the knowledge that the request will be tempered by what is available. My guess is that no one on the Commission thought for a moment that the package of programs would be enacted at one time. The Commission did expect--and I feel most black Americans anticipated--that a commitment would be made to establish a timetable against which progress or failure could be measured at periodic intervals.

The Commission, I feel, offered wise counsel to the Johnson Administration and its succeeding Nixon Administration that continuation of the inadequate "present policies" approach was likely to be the most costly of all in the long run. It correctly stated that such a course could not even hope to keep pace, much less reverse the deteriorating quality of life in our inner cities. In this regard who can forget the apocalyptic last line in the editorial of Harlems' Amsterdam News the day after the successful moon landing last July: "Yesterday the moon, tomorrow maybe us." It is a small wonder that Roy Wilkins labeled the mission "a cause for shame," and added "there's something wrong with the Government's priority system." The fact that the Report received the chilled reception that it did was because our government leaders recognized the truth is what was being implicitly proposed: it is going to take billions of dollars to save our cities and their inhabitants. But the Commission cannot be blamed for "telling it like it is." It specified the programs; it did not state the dollar equivalents. I doubt if anyone was really surprised that when the dollars were matched with the proposals, they represent an expensive amount.

In passing, I might add that many of the proposals cited by the Commission would be almost costless. There is no explanation offered by Professor Ford for the failure to implement these proposals. For example, the number one cause of the disorders as seen by blacks and as reported in the Commission's findings was police brutality. Yet, I notice no groundswell of support for the public review board proposal. Certainly it

is not the cost that is the obstacle; rather it is the perpetuation of institutional racism that explains the lack of implementation. The same can be said for the multitude of reforms offered to revamp the administration of justice; or the proposals to decentralize city government; or to make school curriculums and textbooks more relevant to ghetto life; or to pass an enforceable fair housing law (note: The Civil Rights Act of 1968 did make provisions for such a code but no funds were subsequently appropriated for its enforcement). The list could go on but I would suggest that the fear of the price tag was by no means the only obstacle to adoption of the Commission's proposals.

On those few occasions when the Report does mention costs, Professor Ford correctly points out that the semantics were highly ambiguous. He cites such phrases as "substantial appropriations," "much greater scale," and "expanded manpower programs," to make his point. My limited experience in the Washington bureaucracy a few years ago taught me a fundamental lesson. That is, the basic tenet of political declarations is that "one must learn to be evasive but still get his point across." The Kerner Commission was a political body. As such, it speaks in generalities but its point is crystal clear. It says that the urban problems of this nation must be placed high on the national agenda. The Commission fully expected that literally hundreds of social science scholars and graduate students would assume the task of deciding exactly how much should be expended on what proposal to meet which problem. Such has certainly been the result.

Turning to the second issue, Professor Ford asserts that there is overlap in the recommendations. The redundancy, he claims, has contributed to the high cost of the entire bundle. He--unfortunately--refers to this phenomenon as "economic over-kill." I would call it "excessive humanitarianism." Expressed in my terms, I think one would quickly conclude that in realm of political reality there would never be such a situation. For if the history of social legislation in the United States has taught any lessons, it is that such programs are never funded at anywhere near the level of need. To believe that we could ever have a situation in which redundancy was a problem in our social programs is, I would submit, a dream that not even the most bloody of "bleeding hearts" would imagine. It is only in the towers of the theoretical abstractionist that one should spend time worrying about problems that will never occur.

Personally, however, I strongly support the Commissions approach of offering a broad array of remedies. The multifaceted problems of our cities are not amenable to any monistic solution (including most particularly the Negative Income Tax alluded to in the paper). The insufferable employment patterns that now describe the labor market experience of black Americans represent an amalgam of causal factors: job discrimination; pervasive unemployment; segregated urban housing patterns, isolated from growing employment opportunities in outlying areas; inferior educational opportunities; inadequate public transportation



systems; insufficient labor market information; and deleterious health conditions. It will not be until all of these problems are attacked in concert that any possible resolution of the urban crisis can be expected. I do not see where the Commission proffered redundant solutions; rather I feel that it correctly concluded that it will take a total assault upon the ghettos of America if any hope of victory is realistically to be expected.

Professor Ford's last point concerns the failure of the Commission to assign priorities. I believe this issue is inextricably tied to my earlier contentions that the answers to the racial crises confronting this Nation will require a multiplicity of diverse and simultaneous program efforts. To try to restructure the welfare system, for example, is a hopeless task unless one concurrently addresses the problems of housing, health, education, and job discrimination. These issues are interdependent. As for the statement that the Commission's staff "blundered" by its failure "to establish an order of priorities in the cost-benefit sense," this charge is a red herring. During the eight month period in which the Commission functioned, I too was in Washington on leave from my teaching post. I served as the Research Director for the Committee on the Administration of Training Programs--a public advisory committee created by the appropriation Committee of the U. S. House of Representatives. In the pursuit of its mission, this Committee sought desparately to find and to use--if possible--the knowledge of benefit-cost analysis to a study of the vast array of manpower and poverty programs. We

surveyed the literature; we met with the twenty members of the Economics Faculty of the University of Wisconsin (which has pioneered such studies); we met with the authors of several completed studies. The net result was the clear recognition that the state of the arts at that time simply precluded the meaningful use of such ratios as policy guides. I realize that with the current snowballing popularity of benefit-cost analysis as topics for Ph.D. dissertations and for sponsored research grants, to dare question the utility of such efforts is to question the authenticity of the Bible. There is no doubt that benefit-cost analysis can be of positive assistance in selecting from alternative approaches a single method to attack a previously determinant target. Benefit-cost analysis, however, is of absolutely no use to public administrator's in determining priorities between different targets. Many politicians have unwittingly contributed to the growth of public support for benefit-cost studies under the assumption that they could compare the benefit-cost ratios of different programs and, thereby, weed-out those with the smallest payoff. That such a comparison would represent a perversion of reality can best be seen by an example. The Job Corps--a program under constant public criticism--serves 16-21 year old youths--mostly males--in a residential (i.e., away from home) setting through a program designed to impart occupational skills and to develop work habits. The Work Incentive Program (WIN)--inaugurated under 1967 amendments to the Social Security Act--is designed primarily to assist

welfare mothers to find employment. The WIN program serves largely unmarried or deserted women and relies upon extensive personal counseling, day care programs for children, basic education, provides transportation to specially developed job opportunities, and so on. Any thought of comparing a benefit-cost ratio between Job Corps and WIN would be frivolous. Each represents an entirely different target group and the cost structures required to meet their needs vary accordingly. The target--or in Professor Ford's terminology--the "priorities" themselves can never be determined by ratio comparisons as implied in his paper. One can use such procedure only to compare alternative methods to meet the needs of Job Corps enrollees but never as a basis for decision between Job Corps and WIN or any other social venture.

I might add that during my tenure in Washington, the staff of the Kerner Commission did contact my Committee in a vain effort to find some way to make the priority decisions which he says they should have offered. After a long series of meetings, they came to the same conclusion that I have just detailed.

In closing, I feel that no summary is necessary and, as a discussant, my role is not to put forth my own views on the Kerner Commission's findings. Rather, I have simply reacted to the points proposed by Professor Ford. However, as variations of these comments have been frequently made, I am most appreciative of the opportunity to respond to them in public.

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