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## Kerner Commission Writing Exercise

*In July 1967, President Lyndon Johnson formed a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. The Commission was tasked with understanding why riots were breaking out in different cities across America. The Commission would also provide recommendations on how to address these issues. Their report was finished in 1968 and became informally known as the Kerner Report, named after the Commission Chair, Otto Kerner, Jr., the Governor of Illinois at the time. The Kerner Report stated that the nation was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” The Kerner report called out “white society” for isolating and neglecting African Americans. It recommended legislation to promote racial integration, create jobs, and provide affordable housing. President Johnson, however, rejected the recommendations. Just one month after the Kerner Report was released, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated (on April 4, 1968). Rioting broke out again in more than 100 cities after the Civil Rights leader’s death. Many people argue that some of the pivotal recommendations made in this report still remain unaddressed today.*

*The following is the Summary Introduction from the 1968 Kerner Report.*

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The summer of 1967 again brought racial disorders to American cities, and with them shock, fear and bewilderment to the nation.

The worst came during a two-week period in July, first in Newark and then in Detroit. Each set off a chain reaction in neighboring communities.

On July 28, 1967, the President of the United States established this Commission and directed us to answer three basic questions:

What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?

To respond to these questions, we have undertaken a broad range of studies and investigations. We have visited the riot cities; we have heard many witnesses; we have sought the counsel of experts across the country.

This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.

Reaction to last summer’s disorders has quickened the movement and deepened the division. Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American.

This deepening racial division is not inevitable. The movement apart can be reversed. Choice is still possible. Our principal task is to define that choice and to press for a national resolution.

To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.

The alternative is not blind repression or capitulation to lawlessness. It is the realization of common opportunities for all within a single society.

This alternative will require a commitment to national action—compassionate, massive and sustained, backed by the resources of the most powerful and the richest nation on this earth. From every American it will require new attitudes, new understanding, and, above all, new will.

The vital needs of the nation must be met; hard choices must be made, and, if necessary, new taxes enacted.

Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice. They strike at the freedom of every citizen. The community cannot—it will not—tolerate coercion and mob rule.

Violence and destruction must be ended—in the streets of the ghetto and in the lives of people.

Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans.

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, and white society condones it.

It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress. It is time to make good the promises of American democracy to all citizens—urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group.

Our recommendations embrace three basic principles:

To mount programs on a scale equal to the dimension of the problems;

To aim these programs for high impact in the immediate future in order to close the gap between promise and performance;

To undertake new initiatives and experiments that can change the system of failure and frustration that now dominates the ghetto and weakens our society.

These programs will require unprecedented levels of funding and performance, but they neither probe deeper nor demand more than the problems which called them forth. There can be no higher priority for national action and no higher claim on the nation's conscience.

*The full text of the Kerner Report is available at: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6545/>*

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### **Writing Exercise**

Reflect on the Kerner Report from the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders and provide a written response to what you have read. Please address the following questions in your response.

- What does the Kerner Report identify as the cause of civil unrest in American cities?
- The Kerner Report famously states, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Think about your own community today. Do any recommendations made in the report still apply today? Why or why not?
- How does the Kerner Report relate to what you have learned regarding African-American life in the ghetto during the late 1960's and early 1970's?