

Primary sources: Kerner Commission and Ferguson Commission reports

Excerpts from the introduction to the [Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders](#), known as the Kerner Commission report

INTRODUCTION

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 ghetto¹ 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.

Excerpt from [Forward through Ferguson: A Path Toward Racial Equity](#), otherwise known as the Ferguson Commission Report (Oct. 14, 2015)

“FORWARD THROUGH FERGUSON”

As with any organization that works closely together on serious issues, the Ferguson Commission has found itself coming back to several phrases again and again. One of those phrases has been, “The only way forward is through.” By this we mean that if we are to move forward as a region, if we are to make true, long-term, sustainable progress, we can’t avoid our reality—we must confront it, and work through it. We believe that if we attempt to skirt the difficult truths, if we try to avoid talking about race, if we stop talking about Ferguson, as many in the region would like us to, then we cannot move forward. Progress is rarely simple, and it rarely goes in a straight line. But we are convinced that progress in the St. Louis region runs through Ferguson, and every issue that the phrase “Ferguson” now conjures.

Though some may be feeling “Ferguson fatigue,” we believe that Ferguson can, and should, represent a collective awakening to the issues that many in our region knew and understood, but for many others were invisible. Now they are not. This new, shared sense of understanding calls us to a shared sense of responsibility, and also brings a shared sense of opportunity. What would a more just, a more unified, a more equitable St. Louis be capable of? We must use the energy and the urgency inspired by Ferguson to find out.

“A PATH”

We have invested thousands of hours in researching, debating, and discussing the calls to action put forth in this report. Yet still, we cannot see the future. Thus, we do not know for certain if these calls to action are the answer. We can’t. But they are what we believe to be the best starting point, the beginning of a path toward a better St. Louis.

We expect that as we travel, the path will change, and we’ll find ourselves navigating places we couldn’t have imagined. That is the nature of efforts like this. But there must be a starting point, and we believe, based on the work we have done, that this is the right starting point.

We are certainly open to the idea that we will uncover new routes and unexpected roadblocks. Our challenge is to keep moving, and to define the ultimate contours over time.

One thing we know for certain: this is not the easy path. That would be avoidance, and avoidance will get us no closer to racial equity. The path to racial equity demands time and persistence, risk and resources.

It is a path that we must travel together.

