**American Experience** ***The Riot Report***

**Premieres Tuesday, May 21, 2024 on PBS and Streaming on PBS.org**

**New Film Explores 1967’s Summer of Racial Unrest**

**and LBJ’s Commission Created to Explain It**

(Boston, MA) — When Black neighborhoods in scores of cities erupted in violence during the summer of 1967, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders––informally known as the Kerner Commission––to answer three questions: What happened? Why did it happen? And what could be done to prevent it from happening again? The bi-partisan commission’s final report, issued in March of 1968, would offer a shockingly unvarnished assessment of American race relations––a verdict so politically explosive that Johnson not only refused to acknowledge it publicly, but even to thank the commissioners for their service. ***The Riot Report*** explores this pivotal moment in the nation’s history and the fraught social dynamics that simultaneously spurred the commission’s investigation and doomed its findings to political oblivion. Directed by Michelle Ferrari, co-written by Ferrari and *New Yorker* journalist Jelani Cobb, and executive produced by Cameo George, ***The Riot Report*** premieres on **American Experience** on Tuesday, May 21, 2024, 9:00-11:00 p.m. ET ([check local listings](https://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001lswnKdgoPMzgPRrwVw-vyj3_5bjd7tOQsl3tGjb-IWipGusKrY3CZSgSpIlTd8ZNfk4e7Ak8ScIlTeg6-7XzMLQNctp9G92I6SJcXaMsBCQ8ODjOQpaSilvbPGXUlIoUDOCoL4BZpOQkn4BB0nGE46dYoeFMVwQP&c=cTqMsIBK_2RGunUpQSSKNc4lJsZ9neujUUK7Dt_3zZ_h47YqRnoXNA==&ch=2qYdCUxePWhlxKtPMFcWViHzlQnfxJnLApoQzZjon6rvM4_BpF5z9A==)) on PBS, [PBS.org](https://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001lswnKdgoPMzgPRrwVw-vyj3_5bjd7tOQsl3tGjb-IWipGusKrY3CZSgSpIlTd8ZNIyfbJ505IadPifVGf1KWbe9EGTG7MAmdp5D4qbjvnssOdGSaPelgWKbbeMisqMmavgn8TswC_xw=&c=cTqMsIBK_2RGunUpQSSKNc4lJsZ9neujUUK7Dt_3zZ_h47YqRnoXNA==&ch=2qYdCUxePWhlxKtPMFcWViHzlQnfxJnLApoQzZjon6rvM4_BpF5z9A==) and the [PBS App](https://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001lswnKdgoPMzgPRrwVw-vyj3_5bjd7tOQsl3tGjb-IWipGusKrY3CZYj5rBpqQbtocXi7D16xql3iz6VV4DPys1I_5jBxmC4XHldjxzofrvTaniceJ8TjxGiuxzIlQDdCzn0O-nWN04StGCWgA4m2yqN-o5J-2yjY&c=cTqMsIBK_2RGunUpQSSKNc4lJsZ9neujUUK7Dt_3zZ_h47YqRnoXNA==&ch=2qYdCUxePWhlxKtPMFcWViHzlQnfxJnLApoQzZjon6rvM4_BpF5z9A==).

*A person in a helmet standing on a sidewalk

Description automatically generated*

*Troops on Detroit’s Linwood Avenue in 1967.*

*Credit: © Tony Spina/Detroit Free Press via ZUMA Press*

“The simple fact is this: We are in the worst crisis we have known since the Civil War,” said a television journalist in September 1967. Several weeks before, a police raid on an after-hours club in a predominantly Black section of Detroit had sparked racial unrest unlike anything Americans had ever seen: a furious uprising that paralyzed the city, left 43 people dead and burned hundreds of buildings to the ground. Nor was it an isolated incident. The disturbance in Detroit had been preceded that summer by violence in Newark, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Rochester, Toledo, and scores of other cities, mainly in the North and Midwest.

Few contemporary observers expected the bi-partisan Kerner Commission (named after its chair, Governor Otto Kerner Jr. of Illinois) to deliver meaningful answers. Only two members of the commission were Black and both, like the nine white members, had been chosen by Johnson on the strength of their allegiance to him. Adding to the skepticism was the widespread perception that such commissions were typically convened as a gesture without commitment to any particular course. Johnson, for his part, hoped the commissioners would find evidence of outside agitation––ideally, by Communist-aligned advocates of Black Power––and would draw conclusions that both acknowledged his significant civil rights achievements and shored up support for his ambitious social agenda.

But the Kerner Commission defied expectations. In addition to holding *pro forma* hearings with experts, the commissioners toured many of the afflicted cities, an experience that moved Tex Thornton, arguably the commission’s most conservative member, “about ninety degrees to the left,” he said. Those visits were followed by thorough field investigations conducted in 23 cities by teams of social scientists. In the end, although the commissioners split over many issues, there was unanimous consensus for the report’s central conclusion: the cause of urban disorder was white racism––and the spark that set it off was almost invariably police brutality.

Hurried into print, the 708-page report instantly became a *New York Times* bestseller, with more than 700,000 copies sold in two weeks. CBS and NBC aired documentaries inspired by the book, and millions watched as Marlon Brando read excerpts aloud on the late-night talk show circuit. The urgency of the report’s message was further underscored mere weeks after its publication when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated and the nation’s inner cities erupted once more. Yet, according to a poll later that same month, a majority of white Americans rejected the commission’s conclusions and its recommendations. By the time Richard Nixon's law-and-order campaign won him the presidency that fall, the Kerner Commission had been swept from national consciousness. In diagnosing a crisis that Americans then elected to ignore, however, the so-called “Riot Report” was destined to endure. Its findings remain tragically relevant and a dramatic, timely reminder of both the persistence of American racism and the limits of American liberalism.

Says **American Experience** Executive Producer Cameo George, “The Kerner Commission’s unanimous and blistering report put a spotlight on what was at the heart of structural racism and inequality in America. The findings of this dedicated and bipartisan group remain relevant in today’s America, and we hope our film adds some much-needed context to the ongoing national conversation.”

**American Experience*****The Riot Report*** will stream for free simultaneously with broadcast through June 20, 2024, on all station-branded PBS platforms, including [PBS.org](http://pbs.org/) and the [PBS App](https://www.pbs.org/pbs-video-app/), available on iOS, Android, Roku, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV, Android TV, Samsung Smart TV, Chromecast and VIZIO. The film will also be available for streaming with closed captioning in English and Spanish.

**About the Participants**

**David Boesel** was a social science analyst on the Kerner Commission staff.

**David C. Carter** is Associate Professor of History at Auburn University and author of *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration.*

**David Chambers** was an assistant to Kerner Commission Executive Director David Ginsberg.

**Jelani Cobb** is Dean of the Columbia University Journalism School, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, and co-writer of ***The Riot Report***.

**Michael Flamm** is Professor of History at Ohio Wesleyan University and author of *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s.*

**Steven Gillon** is author of *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism.*

**Senator Fred Harris** was a Democratic senator from Oklahoma from 1964-1973 and is the last surviving member of the Kerner Commission.

**Elizabeth Hinton** is Associate Professor of History and African American Studies at Yale University and author of *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America.*

**John Koskinen** was an assistant to Kerner Commission Deputy Director Victor Palmieri.

**Kahlil Gibran Muhammed** is Professor of History, Race and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School and author of *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America.*

**john a. powell** is Professor of Law, African American and Ethnic Studies, and Director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley.

**Vesla Weaver** is Professor of Political Science and Sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

**Joshua Zeitz** is author of *Building the Great Society: Inside Lyndon Johnson’s White House*.

**About the Filmmakers**

**American Experience *The Riot Report***

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| Directed by  Written by  Edited by  Produced by  Co-Produced by | MICHELLE FERRARI  MICHELLE FERRARI & JELANI COBB  KARL DAWSON  CONNIE HONEYCUTT & MICHELLE FERRARI  JELANI COBB | |
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**American Experience** is a production of **GBH Boston**

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| Executive Producer | CAMEO GEORGE |

**Michelle Ferrari (Director/Writer/Producer)** has been creating innovative, critically acclaimed documentary narratives for more than two decades. Her work as a screenwriter and story editor has been seen on PBS, HBO, and at film festivals nationwide, and has garnered honors from the Writers Guild of America, the Western Writers Association, the Organization of American Historians, the Sundance Film Festival, and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. The writer of numerous American Experience films –– among them *The Perfect* *Crime, Silicon Valley, Roads to Memphis*, and *Kit Carson* –– Ferrari is perhaps best known for the highly rated *Seabiscuit*, which earned her a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing. She wrote and directed *Edison*, *Rachel Carson*, *The Eugenics Crusade* (2019 Writers Guild Award), and, most recently, the Peabody-nominated two-part series *The Vote* and *Sandra Day O’Connor: The First* for the series. Additional credits include the landmark PBS series *Half the Sky* and the Emmy-winning HBO documentary *Marina* *Abramović: The Artist Is Present*. Ferrari is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and holds an M.A. in American History from Columbia University.

**Jelani Cobb (Writer/Co-Producer)** joined the Journalism School faculty of Columbia University in 2016 and became Dean in 2022. He has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2015. He received a Peabody Award for his 2020 PBS *Frontline* film *Whose Vote Counts?* and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Commentary in 2018. He has also been a political analyst for MSNBC since 2019. He is the author of *The Substance of Hope: Barack Obama* *and the* *Paradox of Progress* and *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic*. He is the editor or co-editor of several volumes including *The Matter of Black Lives*, a collection of *The New Yorker*’s writings on race, and *The Essential Kerner Commission Report*. He is producer or co-producer on a number of documentaries including *Lincoln’s Dilemma, Obama: A More Perfect Union* and *Policing the Police*. Dr. Cobb was educated at Jamaica High School in Queens, NY, Howard University, where he earned a B.A. in English, and Rutgers University, where he completed his MA and doctorate in American History in 2003. He is also a recipient of fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation and the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of the American Journalism Project and was elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in 2023.

**Cameo George** (**Executive Producer,** **American Experience)** is an Emmy Award-winning producer, writer and journalist with more than 20 years of experience in documentary, broadcast television and digital content production. George has produced, developed and commissioned innovative programming at CNN, NBC News and ABC News. She was the senior producer of CNN’s groundbreaking series *Black in America* and *Latino in America* and executive producer of the eight-hour PBS documentary series 16 FOR '16: THE CONTENDERS, which was also broadcast on the BBC. George joined **American Experience** from ABC News, where she was head of development for long-form projects, responsible for creating a pipeline of docuseries and feature documentary films across Walt Disney Television platforms, including ABC News, Hulu, National Geographic and Disney+.

**About American Experience**

For over 35 years, **American Experience** has been television’s most-watched history series, bringing to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America’s past and present. **American Experience** documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including 30 Emmy Awards, five duPont-Columbia Awards and 19 George Foster Peabody Awards. PBS’s signature history series also creates original digital content that innovates new forms of storytelling to connect our collective past with the present. Cameo George is the series executive producer. **American Experience** is produced for PBS by GBH Boston. Visit [pbs.org/americanexperience](http://pbs.org/americanexperience) and follow us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/AmericanExperiencePBS/), [Twitter](http://twitter.com/amexperiencepbs), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/americanexperiencepbs/) and [YouTube](http://youtube.com/americanexperience) to learn more.

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**Contacts:** CaraMar Publicity

Mary Lugo 770-851-8190 [lugo@negia.net](mailto:lugo@negia.net)

Cara White 843-881-1480 [cara.white@mac.com](mailto:cara.white@mac.com)

Abbe Harris 908-244-5516 [abbe.harris@caramar.net](mailto:abbe.harris@caramar.net)

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