Study Questions:
Kerner Commission Report

There have been many presidential commissions, but few have been more famous—or more controversial—than the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, popularly known as the Kerner Commission. Appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in July 1967, as a series of deadly riots convulsed African American neighborhoods in many U.S. cities, the commission had the task of explaining why the violence was occurring and what to do about it. Johnson was a strong supporter of black rights and a champion of social reform to help the poor and minorities. The Kerner Commission Summary Report, issued February 29, 1968, proposed many reforms to augment the Johnson administration's efforts, but the president was cool to the recommendations because the Vietnam War had become so expensive that the country could no longer afford costly new social programs. In addition, the president worried that the Kerner Commission Report, which asserted that white racism was the primary cause of inner-city problems, would alienate white, middle-class support for the programs it proposed. As a result, even though the Kerner Commission asserted that racial problems were about to fracture American society, many of its recommendations went unheeded.

1. The Kerner Commission issued a controversial report about a difficult and divisive subject. Explain how each of the following persons probably would have reacted to the report's analysis and conclusions: 1) an African American female living below the poverty line in the inner city, 2) a white male working-class laborer living in the same city as the African American female, 3) a white liberal Democrat female in a northern city who supported the civil rights movement and had voted for Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and 4) a male Black Power advocate living in the inner city. Be sure to explain which of the report's main conclusions or recommendations each would have approved and which ones each would have criticized and why.

2. Although the Kerner Commission proposed many new government programs and policies, it also maintained that “new attitudes” were necessary on the part of every American. What new attitudes do you think were required? How important were changes in outlook, thinking, or attitude in resolving the problems of poverty and racism?

3. Many years have passed since the Kerner Commission issued its report and warned that America was moving toward two separate societies divided by race. Do you think that America today still faces that danger? How would you compare fundamental conditions of life in inner cities now and in the 1960s? What improvements have occurred? What problems remain? Have conditions in inner cities deteriorated?

4. Americans continue to differ over how to deal with poverty, racism, discrimination, and inequality. Discuss your views about the role of each of the following in dealing with these issues: individual responsibility; family; community organizations; local government; the news media; the federal government; social activists.