

THE 1966 WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON CIVIL RIGHTS*

KEVIN L. YUILL
University of Nottingham

ABSTRACT. *Lyndon B. Johnson fails to mention the 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights in his autobiography and the conference has been equally ignored by historians. Yet this conference, promised in Johnson's famous Howard University speech in 1965, was to be the high point of Johnson's already considerable efforts on civil rights. Underlying the confusion and rancour that characterized the conference held in June 1966 (but more especially the 'planning conference', held in November 1965) was a struggle to maintain the integrative impetus of the 'American Creed' against the realization that integration was unlikely to take place except in the very long term. The conference transcripts, recorded verbatim, provide a useful reminder of the very different mood of the mid-1960s, suggesting that the extent of panic after the Watts riot went beyond racial issues into fears for the survival of political and governmental institutions. Especially evident is the fragmentation of Johnson's liberal civil rights coalition before dissent on the Vietnam War ensured his downfall.*

Lyndon B. Johnson, unaided by hindsight, should perhaps be forgiven for his overly high expectations for civil rights progress in the spring of 1965. Having recently triumphed in an election, with the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed into law and the 1965 Voting Rights bill looking reasonably certain to pass, he had every reason to expect the 'next and most important phase' of the civil rights struggle, to be launched at the White House Conference on Civil Rights in November, would be a success. Not given to understatement, Johnson expressed his hopes for the adulation the conference would bring him in response to a question by White House aides Morris Abram and Berl Bernard. He paused for a moment before recounting a story from down on the ranch:

In the hill country in the spring, the sun comes up earlier, the ground gets warmer, and you can see the steam rising and the sap dripping. And in his pen, you can see my prize bull. He's the biggest, best hung bull in the hill country. In the spring he gets a hankering for those cows, and he starts pawing the ground and getting restless. So I open the pen and he goes down the hill, looking for a cow, with his pecker hanging hard and swinging. Those cows get so Goddamn excited, they get more and more moist to receive him, and their asses just start quivering and then they start quivering all over, every one of them is quivering, as that bull struts into their pasture.

Bernard and Abram stood, as Johnson had anticipated, with mouths agape. He again paused, then continued: 'Well, I want a quivering conference ... I want

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every damn delegate quivering with excitement and anticipation about the future of civil rights and their future opportunities in this country.¹

Johnson first mentioned the conference in his celebrated Howard University speech of 1 June 1965. Experts and outstanding leaders would gather together, he promised Howard students, to plan and implement the next phase of the civil rights struggle. The conference would ensure African-Americans would ‘move from equality in law to equality in fact’. Entitled ‘*To fulfill these rights*’, the conference was scheduled for the fall of that year.

But Johnson failed even to cite the conference in his autobiography. He highlighted many civil rights accomplishments but neglected to mention that 2,500 delegates from all over the country crowded in to the Washington Hilton Hotel to discuss the way forward for civil rights, never mind whether or not they were ‘quivering’.²

Historians have also ignored the event. Few accounts mention the conference at all.³ Most tend to view the conference as an anti-climax after the passage of the 1964 and 1965 acts or as evidence of Johnson’s waning interest in civil rights. The broad theme running throughout most historical accounts of this time is that Johnson’s interest in civil rights directly reflected its ability to deliver votes; he became distracted by the war in Vietnam and the rising hostility of the white electorate towards the civil rights movement.⁴ Others point out that the growing militancy of the new leadership of the civil rights movement alienated liberals and the mainstream Democrats upon whom Johnson depended for electoral support.⁵

¹ Cited in Joseph Califano, Jr, *The triumph and tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York, 1991), p. 58.

² See Lyndon B. Johnson, *The vantage point* (New York, 1971). Many of the Johnson biographies follow his example: George Reedy, *Lyndon B. Johnson: a memoir* (New York, 1982); Bernard J. Firestone and Robert C. Vogt, eds., *Lyndon Baines Johnson and the uses of power* (London, 1988); Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American dream* (New York, 1976); Booth Mooney, *LBJ: an irreverent chronicle* (New York, 1976); James Macgregor Burns, ed., *To heal and to build: the programs of Lyndon B. Johnson* (London, 1968); Philip Reed Rulon, *The compassionate Samaritan* (Chicago, 1981); Joachim Joesten, *The dark side of Lyndon Baines Johnson* (London, 1968).

³ See, for instance, Mark Stern, *Calculating visions: Kennedy, Johnson and civil rights* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992); Harvard Sitkoff, *The struggle for black equality, 1954–1980* (New York, 1981); James C. Harvey *Black civil rights during the Johnson era* (Jackson, Miss., 1973); Allen Wolk, *The presidency and black civil rights* (Cranbury, N.J., 1971).

⁴ Allen J. Matusow states in *The unravelling of America: a history of liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 1984) that ‘[t]he real meaning of the conference was this: so far as the president was concerned, the civil rights movement was over’ (p. 73). Steven F. Lawson devotes more space to the conference, similarly to indicate the growing acrimony between the civil rights movement and the president – see *In pursuit of power: southern blacks and electoral politics, 1965–1982* (New York, 1985). Lawson also mentions the conference in his chapter, ‘Mixing moderation with militancy: Lyndon Johnson and African-American leadership’, in Robert A. Divine, ed., *The Johnson years: LBJ at home and abroad* (Kansas, 1994). The broad themes running throughout these and many other accounts of the time are Johnson’s relentless pursuit of votes, first black but later the white vote alienated by the civil rights movement, and the culpability of Johnson for neglecting the project of civil rights in favour of prosecuting the Vietnam War.

⁵ Lee Rainwater and William Yancey’s book, *The Moynihan report and the politics of controversy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), the most comprehensive account of the conference, is perhaps the clearest expression of this outlook. Similarly, discussions by Daniel Patrick Moynihan himself express anger at perceived militancy on the part of the poverty movement as well as the civil rights

But the conference transcripts (all discussions at both the ‘planning session’ in November 1965 and the conference proper in June 1966 were recorded verbatim) provide a window on a very interesting and tumultuous era, in the midst of the growing split between Johnson and the civil rights movement, the beginning of liberal dissent over the Vietnam War, and the disputes within the civil rights movement itself. The planning session (by far the more interesting of the two conferences) came less than six months after the announcement of large-scale involvement of US troops in the war in Vietnam and within three months of Watts, the first of a series of ‘long hot summers’ of race riots.

The transcripts also challenge much of the received wisdom about civil rights and race relations during this period. Too much of the literature on race relations exhibits what C. Vann Woodward called ‘continutarianism’ – assuming an inevitability to the historical process, reading attitudes and feelings prevalent today back into a different historical period. The fact that Johnson held such a widely attended conference at all should serve to remind the observer of the extremely different assumptions of the years leading up to the conference, of the essential discontinuity between racial liberalism of the early sixties and the liberal position on racial issues since then. The transcripts demonstrate the surprising extent to which most people – including hardened and cynical activists – continued to hold on to the optimistic outlook that integration was a desirable and realistic goal. This was, perhaps, the last time that the Democrats (which most of the delegates clearly were) who secured power for Kennedy and Johnson attempted to resolve this most difficult of problems by gathering together for a conference, a testament to the enormous confidence of the age. The views of Gunnar Myrdal, who held that the ‘American Creed’ demanded that American institutions accommodate all Americans, still predominated.⁶

The conference transcripts show that the changes that occurred at this time in perceptions about race and race relations stem from what can only be described as a loss of confidence in the viability of the American Creed. Here the stark question that continues to haunt Americans – are American institutions failing blacks or are blacks failing American institutions? – was posed for the first time in the 1960s, though not precisely in those terms, after

movement – see Daniel P. Moynihan *Maximum feasible misunderstanding: community action in the War on Poverty* (New York, 1969), and ‘The president and the Negro: the moment lost’, *Commentary* (Feb. 1967), pp. 31–46. For a clear exposition of this perspective, see Ronald Berman, *America in the sixties: an intellectual history* (New York, 1968).

⁶ See Gunnar Myrdal, *An American dilemma* (New York, 1944). This massive two-volume tome exerted huge influence on nearly all areas touching upon civil rights up to twenty years after its original publication. For a useful demonstration of the book’s influence, see David W. Southern, *The use and abuse of an American dilemma, 1944–1969* (London, 1987), and Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s conscience* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990). Jackson also gives some indication of the mood of racial liberalism in the 1950s in ‘White liberal intellectuals, civil rights and gradualism, 1954–60’, in Brian Ward and Tony Badger, eds., *The making of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement* (London, 1996).

the devastation of Watts shattered the belief in continuous civil rights progress. While some refused to give up on the 'dream' that Dr King had so eloquently articulated at the 1963 March on Washington, most, their doubts reinforced by similar doubts voiced by colleagues, opted to concentrate on more immediate (and diverging) priorities. This process seemed to occur right across the spectrum – the most radical civil rights activists rejecting integration at the same time as conservatives. In terms of policy, the object of race relations moved towards *containing* rather than resolving racial problems between the fall and spring conferences.

Perhaps most importantly, the transcripts illustrate the often-fatal consequences this loss of confidence in the American Creed had for existing political and social institutions. The greatest casualty was undoubtedly the fragile Democratic coalition that had been the core of Johnson's support. Though few, if any, attacked Johnson directly, federal policy came under fire. Many delegates, especially from the churches and the civil rights movement, began to insist that institutions such as labour unions, local Democratic parties, even the organization of the states, must be fundamentally changed to enable black Americans to achieve an equal place in American society. Others, clearly put on the defensive, disagreed. Before generalized dissent regarding the Vietnam war emerged, members of this key group of Johnson supporters fell out over the measures needed to further civil rights, the cause that had united them.

I

Johnson's Howard speech was based on ideas that had been circulating around the higher echelons of government as a result of the efforts of the assistant secretary of labour and director of the office of policy planning and research, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (who, with Richard Goodwin, wrote the Howard speech). Moynihan penned his report, entitled *The negro family: the case for national action*, after reflecting on the destruction of the riots occurring in the summer of 1964.⁷ His position was unique given his dealings both with poverty, having been part of the task-force on manpower conservation, the agency largely responsible for planning the War on Poverty, and with racial issues. In *Beyond the melting pot*, an influential book on the politics of ethnicity in New York that he had written with sociologist Nathan Glazer, Moynihan had foreshadowed some of the issues in his report. The broad theme of the pamphlet, written for the higher echelons of government only, was that the gulf between blacks and whites stemmed at least partly from determinants on the black side of the equation, specifically from 'pathological' problems within the black

⁷ Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey disagree that this was the case, despite the fact that Moynihan mentioned it in an article written for *America* magazine ('Moynihan replies to his critics', *America* (18 Sept. 1965) to which they refer. See Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan report*. Moynihan also cites the importance of 1963 and 1964 riots in later works – see *Maximum feasible misunderstanding: community action in the war on poverty* (New York, 1969). The most useful article of the many written by Moynihan concerning the report and the ensuing controversy is 'The president and the Negro: the moment lost' in *Commentary* (Feb. 1967).

family: 'At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family.'⁸

While Moynihan identified a black 'culture' separate from the rest of America and moved away from the assumptions which predominated in the 1950s – that white prejudice alone was responsible for the position of African-Americans – he emphasized the central optimistic message that racial divisions could be resolved by the efforts of the federal government. The Moynihan report was essentially a prescription which attempted to make blacks equal to the opportunities offered them by the civil rights acts, mostly designed to scare lawmakers and administrators (for whom the report was intended) into action: 'The principal challenge of the next phase of the negro revolution is to make certain that equality of results will now follow. If we do not, there will be no social peace in the United States for generations.'⁹

The conference's purpose was to implement the findings of the Moynihan report and to 'set an agenda on civil rights'.¹⁰ Johnson clearly hoped that the whole nation would become involved in the new effort. As Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey said, the administration 'hoped the conference would help produce a national awareness and generate a consensus to support implementation of various solutions'.¹¹

Johnson initiated a series of planning sessions directed by ten White House assistants in July. The direction in which the conference set off could be imputed from the fact that only one civil rights leader was summoned to testify for these sessions; the academic community was impressively represented by Kenneth Clark, Talcott Parsons, Eric Erikson, Robert Coles, James Q. Wilson, and other distinguished scholars. The agenda planned for the conference continued to centre on the black family during the summer.¹²

The event that shook the federal government, the civil rights movement, and academics alike was the Watts riot in August 1965. Not only did it take most observers completely by surprise; it challenged many of the established race relations methods and practices. Watts was not particularly poor in terms of ghettos and was not seen as a potential flashpoint before the riot. The rioting skewed many ideas regarding poverty, suggesting that poverty and lack of civil rights might not be a direct determinant of rioting and instability; many had predicted that the most serious rioting would occur in the South where the least civil rights existed. Watts provoked widespread questioning of the assumptions

⁸ US Department of Labor (DoL), *The negro family: the case for national action* (Washington DC, 1965), p. 5. The report became known as the 'Moynihan report' after its authorship was leaked to the press.

⁹ US DoL, *The negro family*, pp. 3, 4.

¹⁰ Steven F. Lawson, *In pursuit of power: southern blacks and electoral politics, 1965–1982* (New York, 1985) p. 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² On 10 August 1965, Lee White sent the president a memo on 'Notes for meeting with Whitney Young and A. Philip Randolph' indicating that the conference would build on the 'universal approval' for the direction outlined in the Howard University speech. See *Memorandum to the president from Lee C. White*, 'Notes for a meeting with Whitney Young and A. Philip Randolph', 10 August 1965, White House papers, Human rights – equality of the races, EX HU 2, Part II, *Civil rights during the Johnson administration, 1963–1969* (microfilm), Steven F. Lawson, ed.

upon which policy had been based and focused attention further on to race rather than civil rights and poverty.

The government responded by publishing the Moynihan report, which was used as an explanation of the riots in newspaper columns in September 1965. Watts also persuaded Johnson to reorganize the government's civil rights efforts, replacing Vice president Hubert Humphrey with himself as the official in charge of civil rights.

The initial fears within the administration about the publication of the report centred on the possible response from white racists. News columnists Roland Evans and Robert Novak, in a syndicated article on 18 August 1965, claimed that the secretary of labour, Willard W. Wirtz, was opposed to the release of the report on the grounds that it would 'become grist for racist propaganda mills'.¹³ However, the attack on the Moynihan report came not from the right but from Johnson's purported allies upon whom he had counted to support his initiative – church and civil rights leaders as well as leading liberal academics. Previously, the civil rights movement had been, in the main, a core element of Johnson's support because of the necessity of alliances in the face of Southern opposition.¹⁴ With Watts, the focus moved northwards into liberal Democratic constituencies in inner cities. There, smouldering dissent against de facto segregation had been stifled by the promise of progress which depended upon Democratic unity. Many now believed that Johnson's timorous approach towards powerful Democratic mayors intent on preserving their powerbases created the potential for more riots. After Watts, they became increasingly vocal in their criticisms.

The Moynihan report became the focus for this anger approximately two months after its publication in early August 1965. The report, which essentially built upon points made in the Howard speech (for which Johnson had received 'universal approval'), was seen by radicals in a different light than it had been before the riot. Then, the Howard speech had been welcomed as evidence that Johnson would not rest upon his laurels after the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts had been passed. Six months later, a significant group of liberals and radicals expressed dismay at the direction the report seemed to point towards, evincing their loss of confidence in the federal government's ability to maintain steady progress in civil rights after the Watts riot. The report came to be seen as the first intellectual manifestation of the retreat of the Johnson administration in the face of an electoral 'backlash'.

In an influential piece in the *Nation*, psychologist William Ryan accused the report of 'copping a plea' – pleading guilty to past racism in order to avoid the charge today. A virtual chorus of critics joined in, voicing their criticisms of the administration through the attack on the report, as one of the most influential

¹³ See Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan report*, p. 141. The authors express surprise at this fear, which they acknowledged was rife amongst the administration officials.

¹⁴ In July of 1965, for example, Martin Luther King had led a march of 3,000 people through the streets of Washington, DC, to thank Johnson for his efforts to democratize the District of Columbia.

and leading critics later admitted to Moynihan.¹⁵ They charged that, in Martin Luther King's words, 'the danger will be that problems will be attributed to innate Negro weaknesses and will be used to justify neglect and rationalize oppression'.¹⁶ A clearly shocked Johnson, who had girded himself for opposition from the right, dropped the report and virtually no one, not even Moynihan himself, came forward to defend it, a measure of how seriously the administration regarded this 'mutiny'.¹⁷

II

In the immediate aftermath of the reorganization of federal civil rights efforts after the riot, the planning of the conference suffered. The prospect of having a conference with some 4,000 people attending in a matter of weeks persuaded administration insiders to rethink matters. White House aide Harry McPherson remembered that: '[t]he place was in such chaos that we obviously couldn't have our conference in November of 1965... So we said "All right, let's have a planning conference."' Thus the original date for the conference became the planning session to which 240 'experts' (meaning academics, government advisers, civil rights and church leaders and a small number of 'grass-roots activists') were invited; the full conference was postponed until 1 July 1966. The invitations were sent out only one week before the planning session was held.¹⁸

The choice of delegates to both the fall and spring conferences reflected the administration's attempt to reconstruct 'the coalition which staged the March on Washington, passed the Civil Rights Act, and laid the basis for the Johnson landslide – Negroes, trade unionists, liberals and religious groups'.¹⁹ In other words, Johnson wanted to use the conference to bolster the political consensus with which he had won the election. The consideration, therefore, was not so much to 'solve' the problem, but to line up the political forces that could

¹⁵ Dr Benjamin Payton, a black cleric, organized a 'Pre-White House conference' early in Nov. 1965 which aimed to pressure the White House into dropping the 'black family' as an agenda item at the main event. Two weeks after publishing an attack on the report, he apparently told Moynihan that his paper was really an attack on Johnson but that he had named Moynihan for 'strategical purposes'. See Daniel P. Moynihan, 'The president and the Negro: the moment lost', *Commentary* (Feb. 1967).

¹⁶ David Levering Lewis, *King: a biography* (Boston, 1971) p. 309.

¹⁷ 'Pre-White House Conferences' were held in New York and Cleveland weeks before the main event. The conference held in New York, organized by black churchman Dr Benjamin Payton, demanded that the family be removed as a subject from the WHCCR agenda.

¹⁸ Interview with McPherson conducted by T. H. Baker, 24 Mar. 1969, p. 14 *Civil rights during the Johnson administration* (microfilm) 1963–9 Part III: oral histories. Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan report*, p. 208. A memorandum from Lee White to the president sent on 10 Aug. 1965 indicates that a planning session comprised mainly of experts and government employees was part of the original plan. The original planning session was to occur a 'few weeks' before the main conference in Nov. See 'Notes for a meeting with Whitney Young and A. Philip Randolph', 10 Aug. 1965, EX HU 2/MC Files, *Civil rights during the Johnson administration, 1963–1969* (microfilm), Steven F. Lawson, ed.

¹⁹ Bayard Rustin, 'From protest to politics: the future of the civil rights movement', *Commentary*, 39 (Feb. 1965).

deliver a mandate to solve the problem. Most of those at the conference also appear to have had some sort of affiliation to the Democratic party.²⁰

The agenda was designed to achieve maximum consensus but also subtly to broach some of the ideas contained in the Moynihan report. Five of the sessions reflected ongoing concerns of the civil rights commission reports from years before – voting, education, employment, housing, justice. In addition, three new topics of concern had sessions devoted to them – health and welfare, the community, and the family; subjects to which Moynihan had called attention in his report.

The plenary sessions took place at a dinner held on 16 November and an assembly the following morning. Berl Bernhard, the executive director, amused the conferees when he exclaimed: ‘I want you to know that I have been reliably informed that no such person as Daniel Patrick Moynihan exists.’²¹ This, of course, was not at all true: Moynihan was alive and well and stalking the halls of the conference, speaking in the family session in his own defence after reading Payton’s attack on him. But Bernhard’s *bon mot* set the tone and for the rest of the conference the report received little mention, at least not in a direct sense.

The most controversial of the opening speeches was given by the honorary chairman of the conference, A. Philip Randolph. The White House ‘respected him as a sensible and reliable leader and turned to him when it wanted to keep quarrelling civil rights factions in check’.²² This time, however, Randolph voiced a demand that would cause controversy throughout the fall conference. He made the call for a \$100 billion ‘freedom budget’ the centrepiece of his speech, echoing earlier demands for a black ‘Marshall plan’. The effect of the speech on delegates was to raise the question of commitment to racial equality, effectively putting a price on it. In his speech, Randolph identified both what he felt to be the real problem and the implied solution: ‘The ghetto is the problem and it must be destroyed.’²³

The \$100 billion was a ‘ball-park figure’, as Randolph later admitted. (Apparently, Leon Keyserling lost considerable amounts of sleep working out the arithmetic behind the figure the night after Randolph had made the speech.) Nevertheless, delegates were faced with the relatively new problem of massive funding being necessary to further civil rights progress – something that had not occurred when civil rights problems were restricted to the South. Randolph’s speech indicated the depth of commitment most Americans imagined was needed, dividing delegates between those who sought racial equality at any price and those worried about the implications, fiscal and otherwise, of the racial crisis for American society.

²⁰ In a memorandum to the president, Clifford L. Alexander indicates that ‘[o]ur 350 elected Negro Democrats’ would attend the spring conference, indicating a political bent to the invitations (memorandum to the president from Clifford L. Alexander, 26 May 1966 EX HU/S Files).

²¹ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan report*, p. 248. No record of this exists in the *Records of the WHCCR*.

²² Lawson, ‘Mixing moderation with militancy’, in Divine, ed., *The Johnson years*, III, p. 85.

²³ Transcript of a speech given by A. Philip Randolph, 17 Nov. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

Though the entire conference had been constructed to avoid controversy, the planning session highlighted the lack of agreement among all the groups at the conference. The final draft summing up the planning session put a brave face on the level of agreement running through the fall conference. The opening line tellingly reads: ‘The proceedings of the Planning Session for the White House Conference reveal a *striking amount of agreement* [emphasis added] on the key issues and major elements facing the negro American today.’²⁴

There was, in truth, little agreement throughout the two-day event. The conference showed that, even after a retreat on the issue of the family, the administration constantly ran into dissent and disagreement, if not rancour. Vivian W. Henderson, who was forced to sum up the session on jobs, admitted in a memorandum to Carl Holman in December that ‘Virtually no recommendations came out of the panel on jobs to get at the problem of race relations in employment... [This is] in spite of the fact that considerable discussion was devoted to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.’²⁵ Many sessions could only agree in the end on trivia or obvious platitudes and truisms. Some sessions could not agree anything unanimously. The family session, after an argument lasting two days, was reduced to discussing the need to modify the organization of the Boy Scouts, such was the desperation to reach an agreement of some kind.²⁶

Virtually the only agreement across the board was in opposition to the Moynihan report, used as a rallying point throughout the two-day event. Although it was rarely mentioned – journalist Jean M. White observed that it was ‘the most-avoided topic at the planning session for the White House Conference on Civil Rights’²⁷ – some could not resist a dig at the report and it was alluded to in many discussion panels. Typical of the sideswipes at Moynihan is the phraseology of Jeanette Hopkins, recorder of the education session, at a press conference on 18 November: ‘We discussed the theories of racial inferiority and the contemporary theories of racial inferiority described in the theories of cultural deprivation.’²⁸ In the family session, which was perhaps the most united of the panels, the panel was reminded repeatedly that ‘discrimination is not “passé”’.²⁹ In the health and welfare session, sociologist Frank Reissman attacked ‘new trends in anti-poverty thinking’

²⁴ ‘Final draft – planning session for the White House Conference, “To Fulfill These Rights”’, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 1.

²⁵ Memo to Carl Holman from Vivian W. Henderson, dated 29 Dec. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

²⁶ ‘Final draft – planning session for the White House Conference “To Fulfill These Rights”’, transcripts to ‘Panel no. 5: the family: resources for change’, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 1.

²⁷ Jean M. White, ‘Moynihan report criticized as “racist”’, *Washington Post*, 11 Nov. 1965, ‘Press reports’, *Records of the WHCCR*.

²⁸ Jeanette Hopkins, from a recording of a press conference given on 18 Nov. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

²⁹ Memorandum to Lee C. White from Carl Holman, Berl Bernhard, and Harold Fleming, ‘The family: resources for change – preliminary report’, dated Dec. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

which implied that ‘we ought to correct the people to fit the institutions rather than correct the institutions to fit the people’.³⁰ Ironically, the report with which Johnson had hoped to remobilize his coalition had indeed created a consensus but surely not as Johnson had intended.

However, while many were exceptionally critical of federal agencies, especially the FBI, the ire of the grass-roots activists who were most vociferous at the conference tended not to be directed at the President. Most would preface remarks about the federal government by making an exception for Johnson. Typical is Mr Tournier, a grass-roots activist from Chicago, who attacked the conference because ‘there is no real sincerity here’ but carefully exempted ‘the two speeches that were made by the President and Vice President’.³¹ As a *Philadelphia Bulletin* editorial observed of the fall conference, ‘the animus directed at departments of the government did not seem to be carried over to Mr Johnson, whose commitment to civil rights was not questioned in the parley’.³²

The fall conference transcripts show that Vietnam had yet to become the oppositional issue it later became, yet the link between further progress on civil rights and the Vietnam war was made on the issue of ‘democracy’. The first mention of the conflict in Vietnam came in the panel on voting from John P. Roche, a professor at Brandeis University, who was close to the White House:

There are 450 USIS personnel working in South Vietnam now helping the Vietnamese develop village democracy. Now, I support that completely. The other day seven or eight Viet Cong with a 75mm mortar went out and blew up 150 million dollars worth of airplanes. And we take it in our stride. Now, I happen to support the enterprise in Vietnam. But I support it...as part of...a much broader attempt to maintain a democratic equity... And therefore, it seems to me... that as high a priority is given for the achievement of rights for our America... as is given for the defense of the Asian frontier.³³

Roche’s discussion of the relation of the ‘enterprise’ in Vietnam and the achievement of civil rights suggests that as long as the war was successful and did not adversely affect social progress, liberals vaguely supported it as a realization of a related set of American values. In Roche’s statement, though, can be seen the frustration at the apparent futility of the ‘broader attempt to maintain a democratic equity’. However, the issue came up in only one other session and then occupies only one page of the transcripts. Watts, which would be mentioned so frequently at the spring conference, also remained submerged in the fall. A small group within the voting panel which separated themselves in order to be able to speak solely about Northern problems, threatened ‘a

³⁰ Transcripts of panel no. 4, ‘Health and welfare’, 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

³¹ Transcripts of panel no. 3: Voting, 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, pp. 66–7.

³² Editorial, *Philadelphia Bulletin*, 22 Nov. 1965, ‘Press reports’, *Records of the WHCCR*.

³³ Transcripts of panel no. 3: ‘Voting’, 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 227. Roche, a Democratic loyalist, remained faithful to Johnson even at the height of the protest against the war.

series of Watts, even more serious, even more devastating than the Watts of Los Angeles' if black aspirations were not met.³⁴ Still, this discussion could not be counted as typical of the conference; two panels failed to mention Watts at all and no one else threatened 'a series of Wattses'.

Though Watts may not have been discussed much by civil rights activists, it clearly set many academics and those with government responsibilities on the defensive. The reaction of James Q. Wilson, an associate professor of political science at Harvard, to the threat of a 'series of Wattses' indicated a high level of anxiety: 'There are 170 million of us and 20 million of you... I can assure you that in the white community there the great frustration will make the next repression of Watts – make the Los Angeles police department look like a bunch of boy scouts.'³⁵ Civil rights activist Cecil Moore countered that 70 per cent of the world was coloured and that he would not take responsibility for Watts unless whites took responsibility for Jack Ruby and the Cosa Nostra.

Another notable aspect of the fall conference was the absence of the use of the term 'racism'. Not one white delegate was condemned with the term, nor was it used against Southern segregationists ('bigots' was the preferred term for segregationists). The only racial slur recorded in the transcripts was the much-noted outburst by Lawrence Landry from Chicago in the neighbourhood and community panel, where he demanded that 'a possible elimination of the white, especially the white Jewish, influence in this conference be considered'.³⁶ It was roundly condemned by others in the session.

These omissions can only be seen as indications of delegates' faith, stretched as it may have been, in the ability and will of the existing institutions and agencies to further progress toward a colour-blind society. The political contours of the late sixties, in which Johnson and political liberalism in general had been abandoned by most of the civil rights movement, had yet to be drawn. The threat of further riots like Watts, which would later be deployed in the face of inaction by the government and white society in general, had not yet been developed into a weapon by civil rights activists.

The fall conference, without the Moynihan report (which might have served as a programmatic framework to the conferees' more practical suggestions), drifted into disparate and confused discussions, fuelled by a seeming desperation to gain something positive from the conference but in the end emphasizing the gulf between the aspirations of many of the conferees and reality. Little else could have been expected; the conferees came from the cotton furrows of Mississippi, the ghettos of Northern cities, churches, trade union halls, and from ivory towers of the top universities in the land. But the wild suggestions also reflected the feelings of frustration and desperation common to all.

³⁴ Transcripts of panel no. 3: 'Voting', 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

³⁵ Transcripts of panel no. 3: 'Voting', 18 Nov. 1965, p. 70, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 289.

³⁶ Transcripts of panel no. 8, 'The community: institutions and social action', 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 333.

In panel VIII on 'The community: institutions and social action', one panellist proposed that a 'department of decolonization' be created, while another asked that the negro community be declared a 'national disaster area'. The 'health and welfare' report called for a 'constitutional convention' to consider 'reorganization of the states'.³⁷

Not surprisingly, an atmosphere of blame pervaded the Washington Hilton Hotel that November. Civil rights workers criticized the restrictive practices of organized labour for excluding blacks from meaningful jobs. Many white delegates blamed militancy on the part of blacks for threatening the electoral support behind race reforms. Academics often attacked others for their unwillingness to countenance new approaches to the problem. Government officials subtly criticized their political overlords for failing to commit enough resources to their particular area of concern.

Even the subgroups of the conference became increasingly divided. Very few issues created a united front.³⁸ Within the NAACP, for example, Dr Morsell in panel VII argued strenuously for 'racially-conscious' statistics – in other words, statistics based on race – whereas, when the same question was brought up in panel IV, Clarence Laws, the NAACP representative, objected that 'this is the very thing we have been fighting against'.³⁹

For Johnson, for whom lack of consensus was an anathema, the quarrelling at the conference itself constituted the major barrier to progress. The conference itself threatened the political coalition he had intended to reassemble, which Bayard Rustin had aptly portrayed as 'so inherently unstable and rife with contradictions'.⁴⁰

What stands out throughout the conference is the fear expressed by many for the future of many American institutions. Some delegates began to consider the effect that lack of progress in civil rights would have upon the American school system, the family, elements of the political system and even such fundamental political values as 'democracy' and 'equality'. This anxiety was most palpable in the sessions dealing with political institutions. The implications for the whole post-war pattern of politics seemed serious to many at the conference, especially those from the upper echelons of the government and academia. The preliminary report to panel I-A suggests that 'the old basis for such [political] organization – the ward clubhouse and the organization of job-holders – is decaying or eliminated' and called for a discussion on the psychological dimensions of citizenship.⁴¹ Above all, discussion in the panel addressed the problem of black political participation. Another preliminary report warned

³⁷ Memorandum to Lee C. White from Carl Holman, Berl Bernhard, and Harold Fleming, dated Dec. 1965, 'Health and welfare – preliminary report', Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

³⁸ The exceptions to this were the representatives of labour and the churches, but for different reasons. Labour was put on the defensive by civil rights organisations throughout the planning conference on issues relating to trade union restrictions. On other issues, labour leaders were unaccountable as, indeed, were church leaders who, of course, could not be voted out of office.

³⁹ Transcript to panel no. 4, 'Health and welfare', 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 292.

⁴⁰ Rustin, 'From protest to politics'.

⁴¹ Memorandum from J. Q. Wilson and H. D. Price to 'White House Conference on Civil Rights', dated 3 Nov. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

that ‘the concentration of Negroes in overcrowded areas decreases their political representation in city councils. This, in turn, reduces patronage posts and the exclusion from a fair share of the “spoils system” discourages participation in ward organization.’ The same report went on to suggest that besides the danger of riot was the danger that non-participation of blacks in the electoral process would ‘deal a serious blow to effective government in the urban North’.⁴²

The post-war institutions upon which the Democrats had depended for political power came to be questioned in a seemingly continuous process. In a statement reminiscent of the ‘tangle of pathology’ formulation in its medical metaphor, the preliminary report from the ‘housing and neighborhood’ panel stated that ‘the sickness that causes the ghetto permeates the whole of society’.⁴³ Many felt they had to launch a concerted defence of, if not justification for, some of the institutions being impugned. Each discussion referred to its subject’s vital role in preserving democracy. Hylan Lewis said: ‘It is through the family that the individual enters into the privileges and liabilities bestowed upon him as a citizen.’⁴⁴ A preliminary report for the education panel stated: ‘Public education – the public schools and colleges – are [*sic*] the basic social institutions designed to make real, vitalize and strengthen American democracy.’⁴⁵ The implications that the racial crisis had for concepts such as ‘equality’ and ‘rights’ can be seen in the transcripts. In the session on the family, sociologists Lee Rainwater and Herbert Gans argued that the concept of rights should include the ‘right’ to a minimum of resources. For Gans, rights should include ‘those resources and experiences which will socialize him in such a way that he can function in the society as it is’.⁴⁶ Similarly, Frank Reissman argued in the panel on health and welfare that ‘services are to be recast as rights’.⁴⁷ What, in fact, these suggestions reflected was the desire, in the face of the apparent inapplicability of these terms to black Americans, to redefine the terms themselves in order to make them relevant to *all* Americans, surely a measure of the depth of anxiety about the racial crisis.

Other ideas that would become popular later were raised here, too. The Reverend Gayraud S. Gilmore, the executive director of the Presbyterian church’s commission on race and religion, stated that whites living in areas with no minorities could be said to be ‘culturally deprived’.⁴⁸ In the education panel, concern was expressed for white children in segregated schools which

⁴² Memorandum from Sterling Tucker to Berl Bernhard, Harold Fleming, Carl Holman, Liz Drew, dated 5 Nov. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 3.

⁴³ Memorandum to Lee C. White from Carl Holman et al., ‘Housing and the neighborhood – preliminary report’, 3 Dec. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Hylan Lewis, preliminary paper for the session on the family, ‘The family: resources for change’, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

⁴⁵ Planning session agenda paper on education, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Transcripts of panel no. 5: ‘The family: resources for change’, 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Transcripts of panel no. 4: ‘Health and welfare’, 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 150.

⁴⁸ Letter from Reverend Gayraud S. Wilmore, Jr, to Carl Holman, 7 Jan. 1966, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

made it difficult if not impossible ‘to prepare white children for life in a democratic society and to function effectively in a world of human diversity’.⁴⁹ Again, basic institutions must be changed, some delegates reasoned, in order to revive their universal applicability.

Almost inevitably, anxieties about the survival of institutions often focused attention on those perceived to be threatening those institutions. With expectations of further rioting, analyses of race relations had begun concentrating on the ‘unstable’ black population and on black demands, rather than on the psychology of Southern whites, as had been the case in the 1950s. As the inimitable Mr Stanley Branch, a black political organizer from Chester, Pennsylvania, exclaimed: ‘there have been enough papers, enough votes, and enough committees to last from here to eternity on the study of Negroes. We have been studied long, wide, up, down, and every other way.’⁵⁰

The lack of control over the ghetto by the authorities elicited much concern at the planning conference. One manifestation of this concern, mainly within the liberal academic establishment, was the panic over population. The Moynihan report, as well as a number of scholarly articles at the time, raised the issue of family planning and spoke of the ‘population explosion’ amongst African-Americans, Moynihan made the point that ‘[t]he dimensions of the problems of the Negro Americans are compounded by the *extraordinary growth* of the Negro population’⁵¹ [emphasis added]. Similarly, Philip M. Hauser, writing in *Daedalus*, identified ‘a decrease in the Negro birth-rate’ as the most important demographic task. Hauser located the difficulty of integrating African-Americans in the continued rapid growth of the black population.⁵² These concerns were echoed in the conference. Dr Alan Frank Guttmacher, president of the ‘Planned Parenthood World Population Federation’, attended the session on the family and specified the real differential between white and non-white fertility rates. He made what appears to be a flippant comment that, nevertheless, reflected his worries about the ‘wrong’ people having too many children: ‘You can’t *make* a person take contraception. Unfortunately.’⁵³ In the preliminary report of the panels on ‘The community: institutions and social action’ the recorder indicated that family planning aid was heartily supported’, though there is less evidence of this hearty support in the transcripts of that panel.⁵⁴

It was left to Cecil Moore to make an appropriate riposte to these neo-Malthusians in one of the rare attacks on the emphasis on population:

⁴⁹ Memorandum to Lee C. White from Carl Holman et al., ‘Education – preliminary report’, 3 Dec. 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Transcripts of panel no. 3: ‘Voting’, 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 125.

⁵¹ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan report*, p. 25.

⁵² See Philip M. Hauser, ‘Demographic factors in the integration of the Negro’, *Daedalus*, Fall 1965, p. 866.

⁵³ Transcript to panel no. 5, ‘The family: resources for change’, 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 63.

⁵⁴ Preliminary report on ‘The community: institutions and social action (panel VIII)’, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

And I have noticed that every time that we talk about population and planned parenthood, the only country I find that wants to limit poverty by limiting the poor – they always want to do it in Africa and South America and Asia, but I never heard them talk about doing it in Paris or England. Then I hope I am not belaboring the point, but don't take that away from negroes, because we don't have much else.⁵⁵

'Family planning' was not the only method of restricting the population of African-Americans. A 'Miss Bennet', speaking in the first of the jobs panels, thought that the flow of illiterate black rural migrants had to be stemmed: 'You have in Watts, now, 1000 newly arriving illiterates from the rural South every month adding to that. I think we ought to take a little bit of time to talk about these people in the rural areas because they are going to prevent solutions to the problems.'⁵⁶ Miss Bennet's solution was a massive plan to pastoralize the South, reminiscent of the Morgenthau plan to pastoralize Germany mooted during the Second World War, to provide more adequate livings for rural blacks and thus keep them out of the cities where they created trouble.

Concerns about unstable elements in society were not restricted in subject to African-Americans. James Q. Wilson clearly included whites in his expressed disagreement with the emphasis on community action put forward by Richard Cloward, Sol Alinsky, and many associated with the poverty programmes. In the 'community' discussion, Wilson voiced the fear that citizen participation could lead to dangerous sentiments being raised:

Now, if by maximum citizen participation in all areas... we mean giving away what power now exists in city hall or the county courthouse, in the Federal Government to the neighborhoods, to the black groups, to the citizen groups, so that they can determine the activities of the local programs, then it seems to me that we are destroying the necessary preconditions for change, because the great majority of poor people in this country... are not the people who are in sympathy fundamentally with the goal of integration and equal opportunity.⁵⁷

At the base of the confusion, antagonisms and the air of uncertainty running throughout the conference lay a question creating anxiety deep within the psyche of both black and white delegates: the question of whether America should continue to attempt to resolve the problem of racial discrimination and antagonism or whether it should take more temporary and limited measures that acknowledged the divisions between black and white Americans. This tension between 'color-blindness', the purported aim of federal policy since Truman, and compensatory measures specific to blacks (later known as 'affirmative action') emerged as the underlying problem of the conference. While Watts did not yet appear as a badge of opposition to Johnson, it had starkly shown the failure of all civil rights and anti-poverty efforts to stem racial

⁵⁵ Transcript to panel no. 3, 'Voting', 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 361.

⁵⁶ Transcripts of panel no. 1-A, 'Jobs', 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 64.

⁵⁷ Transcripts of panel no. 3: 'Voting', 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 314.

instability. Rather than high-profile moves towards involving the whole country in the project of racial equality, many delegates began to wonder whether a new policy-strategy that acknowledged the need for unequal treatment was necessary.

In each of the sessions of the planning conference, in every subject that came up for discussion, this question was expressed. For example, an important discussion throughout many of the sessions centred on the question of whether or not racial statistics should be kept. Some argued that the colour-blind position of the past actually allowed discrimination to take place; racial statistics would ensure equitable treatment. A Mr William Berry argued precisely this point in the community panel:

I am suggesting an inversion, a complete inversion of the program and the formula that industry has had up to now, and I would like to see us go on record here as requesting that racial identification be made respectable and put back into all programs...

I was one of the big ones that was running around in 1948 to get racial identification off of everything but now I discover... that, far from racial identification being taken off of applications and things, far from that helping us, it has provided a haven for the discriminator.

Others, however, argued that to collect statistics based on race created a dangerous precedent by defining men and women by the colour of their skin. Surely this was a form of racial discrimination, even if the intentions behind the gathering of these statistics had the interests of African-Americans in mind? Dr Eli Ginzberg argued in the first panel on jobs that 'We should not talk about negroes as a single concept.'⁵⁸ Many also objected on the basis that 'this is the very thing we have been fighting against in the past'.⁵⁹ After a prolonged argument between Herbert Hill of the NAACP and Don Slaiman of the AFL-CIO on nearly every other issue, they both agreed that racial statistics were not in the interests of anybody: 'We are opposed to the keeping of such records.'⁶⁰ Most of these quandaries remained unresolved in the sessions.⁶¹

In several of the panels a debate broke out about the future of the ghetto. Whitney Young raised the question as chair of the health and welfare panel: 'for years in the civil rights movement we said we did not want any new schools, we don't want any new hospitals, we don't want anything new in a Negro neighborhood because this reinforced the segregated pattern. What is our

⁵⁸ Transcripts of panel no. 1-A, 'Jobs', 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 188.

⁵⁹ Transcripts of panel no. 4: 'Health and welfare', 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 292.

⁶⁰ Transcripts of panel no. 1-B, 'Jobs', 18 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 290.

⁶¹ Some government resource people, who generally favoured racial statistics and also were responsible for reporting back to the conference organizers, resolved the difficulties in the reports. In the Health and Welfare session, the recorder stated that 'the panel agreed on racial statistics on all programs concerned with providing health services to the public'. According to the transcripts, the panel had agreed nothing of the sort (preliminary report of panel no. 4: 'Health and welfare', Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*).

position now?’ Young went on to say that he now simply wanted quality schools and facilities in black neighbourhoods.⁶² Michael Harrington disputed the point, maintaining that ‘the fundamental task of the society is to destroy the ghetto’ and that ‘government support of the small Negro business [is] subsidizing the negro exploiter’. Harrington stated later that ‘if you assume the persistence of the ghetto this is another White House conference’.⁶³ The final report of the planning conference characteristically attempted to blur over the argument by stating that ‘It is not necessary to think of negro entrepreneurship as an exclusively Negro activity; joint ventures involving Negroes and Whites should be encouraged.’⁶⁴

Probably the clearest demarcation between integration and segregation emerged in the discussion about education. This group debated whether ‘cultural deprivation’ could be spoken of, or whether ‘compensatory education’ was not simply a cop-out for schools resisting integration. Psychologist Dr Kenneth Clark hoisted the flag for integration and against the concept of compensatory education: ‘But the issue still remains that even if they [compensatory education programmes] were functioning at a more acceptable level of efficiency, they could substitute for – could be the present form of separate but equal.’⁶⁵

III

Compared to the fall conference, which was at least open to discussion and dissent, the spring conference was an entirely orchestrated affair, designed not to resolve or even meaningfully discuss problems but to maintain the illusion of progress towards resolving problems. Faced with possible embarrassment (one headline assessment of the fall conference was entitled simply ‘CIVIL RIGHTS DISASTER’⁶⁶), Johnson opted to remove controversy and potentially controversial delegates from the spring conference. In doing so, he effectively gave up the search for lasting race relations solutions and settled for containment of the problem.

Johnson did not seriously consider cancelling the spring conference but was critical of his aides for allowing such a debacle to take place. When the question

⁶² Transcripts of panel no. 4: ‘Health and welfare’, 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 135.

⁶³ Transcripts of panel no. 1-A, ‘Jobs’, 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*, pp. 118, 117, 138. Also of interest in this discussion is Harrington’s contention that ‘it is as a result of Negro action that we have a poverty program’. This, from the most influential writer on poverty in the early 1960s, largely credited with inspiring Kennedy’s efforts on poverty, seems damning evidence indeed against those who contend that the poverty discussions emerged independently of the issue of civil rights. This point of view has been recently propounded by Gareth Davies (see ‘War on dependency: liberal individualism and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964’, *Journal of American History*, 26.)

⁶⁴ Memorandum to Lee C. White from Carl Holman et al., 3 Dec 1965, Sylvester papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

⁶⁵ Transcripts of panel no. 4: ‘Health and welfare’, 17 Nov. 1965, planning session papers, *Records of the WHCCR*.

⁶⁶ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, ‘CIVIL RIGHTS DISASTER’, syndicated column, 21 Nov. 1965.

Table 1. *Makeup of the conference (%)*

CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS	10
POOR AND GRASS-ROOTS ORGANIZATIONS	7.5
STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS	20
BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY	15
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS	10
LABOUR	5
RELIGIOUS GROUPS	5
FRATERNAL, SERVICE, AND WOMEN'S GROUPS	5

came up, Harry McPherson told Johnson he had to honour the promises made in his Howard speech: 'And he [Johnson] said 'That's right. But you boys have gotten me in this controversy over Moynihan, so I've got to get somebody like Heineman to get me out of it.'⁶⁷ Ben Heineman was chairman of the board of Chicago and Northwestern Railway and was considered tough enough to do the job.

With the appointment of Heineman, Johnson signalled a different approach to the spring conference than he had originally envisaged.⁶⁸ Reacting to the failure of the planning conference to reach just about any agreement, Johnson would ensure that those at the fall conference who had attacked the Moynihan report and, thus, Johnson's leadership during the civil rights crisis, would be marginalized in order that the next layer of potential support for the administration's civil rights efforts was not alienated. The overriding aim of this conference was to convince the electorate 'that the solution of human rights problems are in their best interest – not just for the benefit of minorities'.⁶⁹

The new weighting of the conference included more business people and marginalized the civil rights movement, or at least those civil rights leaders who were perceived by the White House as troublemakers. Table 1 shows the makeup of the conference. The remainder was made up by groups allotted less than 5 per cent of the 2,500 invitations.⁷⁰ 519 news reporters were accredited to the conference, suggesting that the conference's appearance might be more important than its content, at least for the White House.

Also, the 'scholars and experts' called for in Johnson's Howard University speech, those academics who had proved so troublesome in the fall, were barely represented at the spring conference. While the percentage of government

⁶⁷ Interview with Harry McPherson, 24 March 1969, *Oral histories*, p. 17.

⁶⁸ This is a debatable point. The appointment of a businessman to a leadership position of a civil rights body was hardly unprecedented. Truman, for instance, had appointed Charles E. Wilson, president of General Electric, to chair his 'President's committee on civil rights'.

⁶⁹ Harry McPherson, cited in Lawson, *In pursuit of power*, p. 45.

⁷⁰ Allocation of delegates approved by the Council to the White House Conference, from a letter from Berl I. Bernard to James Linen, president of Time, Inc., dated 19 Apr. 1966, papers of the chairman, *Records of the WHCCR*.

officials remained high, as it had in the fall conference, those attending the spring conference were largely local, low-level officials or those not primarily concerned with national issues. Many others who attended were local civil rights leaders, again, less concerned with national issues than with their own, particularized problems. In essence, Johnson had skipped the layer of people he had failed to rally behind him in the fall.

Learning from the mistakes made in the organization of the planning conference, the administration ensured from the start that the spring conference would be ruthlessly organized in order to emphasize the leadership of Johnson and prevent any possible embarrassments to him. Most major decisions came right from the top. According to one account, Johnson, whose attention to detail remains legendary, went through the list of invitees one by one.⁷¹

The decision of SNCC to boycott the conference in May 1966 over Vietnam and Johnson's direction on civil rights pleased administration strategists who sought harmony in the conference. They considered the group's 'present leadership...so radical that inside the conference, they could only be arch troublemakers; outside, they will provide a kind of foil that may reassure the middle-ground, well meaning people that the conference is not altogether kooky'.⁷²

The group of 2,500 delegates were broken into twelve groups of some 200 each that were to discuss the recommendations from the council or any other topic that might be raised. The transcripts show that the groups were, as with the fall conference, made up of a cross-section of the attendance at the conference. Unlike the fall conference, each committee discussed the same four topics. Everyone at the conference had the chance to talk about housing, economic security, education, and the administration of justice – the problematic topic of 'the family' had been jettisoned by the council to the White House conference, set up to ensure the spring conference would be a smooth affair. Each committee was assigned a chairman who remained with them for the whole conference. Panels of experts on the subjects to be discussed rotated from one committee to another. No vote was to be taken on any resolutions or on the recommendations of the council themselves. Key addresses at the conference were given by President Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Thurgood Marshall, Roy Wilkins, and A. Philip Randolph.

Despite all the efforts to contain the controversy, many disputes broke out during the conference. However, a prepared conference leadership handled the disputes admirably. An example of the smooth running of the affair was the issue of resolutions and voting. Floyd McKissick let it be known that he was going to put a motion to the opening session that resolutions be made and voted upon in the conference committee. The council, seeing that McKissick had some support, compromised, allowing resolutions to be made during the last voting committee meeting.

The many diverse delegates came to the conference with their own localized

⁷¹ Jim Bishop, *The days of Martin Luther King* (New York, 1971), p. 427.

⁷² Cited in Lawson, *In pursuit of power*, p. 45.

problems and issues introducing a large number of different discussions. One delegate would get up and bring up the problem of lily-white unions in the South and be followed immediately by a man who suggested that a major reason for black unemployment was the lack of automobiles owned by blacks, which prevented them travelling to work. Rainwater and Yancey accurately sum up the sessions at the spring conference when they state: ‘There was no interchange of ideas. There was no real dialogue. The government had presented its recommendations; now the delegates were presenting theirs. Conflict and debate cannot be said to characterize these meetings.’⁷³

Press reports concur with Rainwater and Yancey. One commentator stated that ‘[i]t had the air of a middle-class convention of small-town merchants, appliance-dealers, lawyers, students’.⁷⁴ Richard Rovere described the look of the conference: ‘Their [the conferees] dress was uniformly conservative and frequently, though quietly, opulent.’ He cited some of the organizations attending the conference as ‘Jack and Jill of America, Inc.’ of St Louis, Michigan Barbers’ School, Can Do of Jersey City, Glass Bottle Blowers Association of the United States and Canada.⁷⁵

Dissent was so fragmented as to leave delegates feeling impotent and isolated rather than determinedly oppositional. Each section was ruthlessly chaired, and any debate threatening the authority of the conference or Johnson could be (and was) easily avoided by the chair with the excuse that time was limited. Much of the time was taken up by the panel of experts, leaving less time for discussion. Many of the delegates thought the proceedings useless. The frustration comes through when Septima Clarke of SCLC asks the panel: ‘Can you give me some specific things that we can use to revitalize the ghetto? Can you give me something I can take back home to Selma, Alabama?’ Equally, James Meredith, the ex-serviceman who would be shot a week later on a march to Mississippi, expressed dismay at the way the proceedings unfolded: ‘Mr. Chairman, I’m James Meredith and what I want to know is the purpose of my being here... I’m sure you didn’t ask us here to waste our time.’⁷⁶

Martin Luther King’s advisers told him not to return to the conference the second day. After hearing that Wilkins would give the speech at the all-important dinner session, King claimed he was ill and could not attend. Luckily for the administration, who would have been embarrassed by King’s absence, King was miraculously cured of his illness, after Heineman, justifying Johnson’s trust in his leadership, asked King’s wife, Coretta, to sing the ‘Star Spangled Banner’.⁷⁷

⁷³ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan report*, p. 279.

⁷⁴ Peter Lisagor, News World Service in the *Charlotte, N.C. News*, 4 June 1966, planning session – press coverage, *Records of the WHCCR*.

⁷⁵ Richard Rovere, ‘Letter from Washington’, *New Yorker*, 28 June 1966, general area – press clippings, *Records of the WHCCR*.

⁷⁶ Ctte no. vi, p. 43; Ctte no. vii, ‘White House Conference – Committee Hearings’, *Records of the WHCCR*, p. 123.

⁷⁷ Transcript of an interview with Ben Heineman by Joe B. Frantz, 16 Apr. 1970, *Oral histories*, p. 17.

As the conference proceeded, the numbers attending the sessions dwindled. Even by the second meeting most sessions were halved – only 75 people attended in one committee. In that same committee, only 54 were left, and in two other committees, 61 and 55 stayed on. Only in the last session did attendance pick up, and even then there were only 81 delegates in one committee and 75 in another. Rainwater and Yancey reported that many delegates preferred to meet old friends and socialize in the corridors.⁷⁸

As far as the aims the administration set out to achieve were concerned, the conference was a success. Given the dangers that holding the conference risked, the conference ran remarkably smoothly. Evans and Novak in their syndicated column, entitled ‘Better Than Nothing’, stated of the conference: ‘disaster was avoided at the cost of blandness’, describing it as ‘two days that passed peacefully but unproductively’.

Even so, there were many indications at the conference of the fissures within the Democratic coalition and within liberalism itself, presaging Johnson’s downfall two years later. Watts, far from the ‘most avoided topic’ it had been in the fall, became the most commonly cited topic.⁷⁹ One session was told that 120 different ‘Watts-like’ problems occurred in 1965. Louis Lomax assured the conferees that trouble was brewing in Los Angeles at that very moment. The issue of Vietnam had now become a symbol of open revolt against the president. All resolutions calling on Johnson to quit Vietnam were either ruled out of order or defeated because of the ruthless chairing of the sessions, but also because few of the conference delegates shared concerns about Vietnam, although Heineman was at one point forced to turn off the microphone to prevent Floyd McKissick seizing it to convince delegates to support his anti-Vietnam resolution.⁸⁰

IV

Due to the successful stifling of meaningful debate within the conference and the exclusion of many of the most articulate figures from the November conference, the most important debates occurred outside the spring conference. Television and press coverage of the conference concentrated more on the small group of pickets boycotting the conference than on the sanguine reports from the press officers.

When James Meredith walked for freedom through Alabama the following week, the press forgot the conference altogether. Besides the fact that Meredith had been shot by an angry segregationist, liberals pondered the meaning of ‘black power’, a rallying cry shouted by civil rights activists accompanying Meredith. ‘Black power’ appeared more militant, as it began from the premise that integration was impossible and perhaps not even desirable. Stokely

⁷⁸ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan report*, p. 281.

⁷⁹ The phrase is used no less than five times in panel no. 1 in their discussion on education. See panel no. 1, education discussion, ‘White House Conference – committee hearings’, *Records of the WHCCR*, pp. 58, 65, 84.

⁸⁰ Transcript of an interview with Ben Heineman by Joe B. Frantz, 16 Apr. 1970, *Oral histories*, p. 17.

Carmichael, who won control of the SNCC in May 1966, stated to the press that ‘integration is irrelevant’. He summoned ‘all black Americans to begin building independent political, economic and cultural institutions that they will control and use as instruments of social change in this country’.⁸¹

The connotations of an anti-white rebellion summoned up by ‘black power’ obscured its more important meaning to the civil rights coalition. Liberal journals and magazines took the anti-integrationist idea implicit in ‘black power’ much more seriously. As an article in the now-defunct liberal journal *Ramparts* stated of the SNCC’s boycotting of the conference: ‘These events signify more than a mere faction struggle in the civil rights movement. They are symptoms of an underlying conflict over political strategy.’⁸²

A heavyweight debate in *Commentary* magazine between Bayard Rustin, defending the goal of integration, and David Danzig, defending black power, used many of the same arguments heard at the November conference. As Danzig stated, ‘[d]isillusion with the liberal idea of color-blindness and the adoption of a strategy of color-consciousness is characteristic of the negro militants and is, indeed, at the heart of what “black power” is all about’. Rustin could only protest negatively that proportional representation was no panacea for black problems.⁸³

Rustin and integrationists such as Martin Luther King fought a losing battle against what increasingly seemed an inevitable response to the failure of American society to progress towards integration. At the same time as the Johnson forces in the conference were defending the civil rights record of their president, Christopher Jencks and Milton Kotler of the sober Institute for Policy Study put forward their argument for colour-consciousness at the same time (albeit not with the same force) as ‘black power’ militants:

The Negroes’ long-term aim may be to make America color-blind and to compete as individuals within an integrated society but until they can compete more successfully than they now do, and win more acceptance than they now have, they will also need color-conscious organizations to bargain for them, to protect their collective interests, and to try to affect the terms on which individual competition takes place.

In an effort to prevent controversy, the administration quietly acquiesced in the new political reality. The strategy for race relations moved, with little fanfare, from integration towards recognition of racial divisions as at least a temporary reality. More perceptive journalists were able to detect the new atmosphere at the conference. News columnist Holmes Alexander observed that the ‘thesis of racial integration ... was “dead on arrival” at this summer’s White House Conference on Civil Rights’.⁸⁴ Journalist James J. Kirkpatrick complained that the whole philosophy of colour-blindness had been overturned

⁸¹ Cited in ‘Is integration irrelevant?’, an editorial in *The New Republic*, 4 June 1966.

⁸² Christopher Jencks and Milton Kotler, ‘Black government?’, *Ramparts*, July 1966.

⁸³ David Danzig, ‘In defense of “black power”’, Bayard Rustin “Black Power” and coalition politics’, *Commentary* (Sept. 1966).

⁸⁴ Holmes Alexander, ‘Can LBJ and others shatter such a wall?’, *Indianapolis Star*, 3 June 1966, general area – press clippings, *Records of the WHCCR*.

to a 'colour-conscious' strategy without anyone at the conference objecting. He describes the lack of reaction to these 'profound changes' at one session of the conference: 'No one in the room objected. On the front row, a nun kept on knitting.'⁸⁵

Johnson, a politician tied by political method and intellectual affinity to the New Deal, could not have reversed the political tide, nor could he have adapted to it, so much was it based on the perception that previous policies (that is, Johnson's) had failed. It is doubtful whether he ever comprehended the profound changes occurring in the struggle for civil rights. Harry McPherson was probably right when he characterized Johnson with a quote from Walter Bagehot's essay, 'The character of Sir Robert Peel': 'So soon as these same measures, by the progress of time, the striving of understanding, the conversion of receptive minds, became the property of second-rate intellectuals, Sir Robert Peel became possessed of them also.'⁸⁶ Perhaps it is not so surprising that he omitted to include any reference to the conference in his memoirs, incapable as he must have been of accepting that the vision of an integrated America he had fought so hard to achieve receded under his helmsmanship.

V

Certainly, a level of continuity can be traced in the material condition and the physical separateness of African-Americans in relation to whites at least since the early 1960s.⁸⁷ What did change, as the conference transcripts demonstrate, were the aspirations of those Americans, black and white, who sought (and still seek) to redress this racial divide. By outlining the 'colour-blind' strategies that conferees had promoted and that had been official federal government policy in the past, the conference transcripts illuminate a period often forgotten today, when it was assumed by nearly everyone that blacks were 'white men in black skins', to paraphrase Kenneth Stamp, when the term 'desegregation' implied nothing less than the total integration of American society. Many conference delegates found it remarkably difficult to abandon this perspective and insisted that the persistence of racial divisions must be a manifestation of poverty or a result of the lack of formal rights given African-Americans in the South.

The confusion and disagreement that characterized the fall conference reflected the loss of confidence that this Myrdalian ideal could be achieved. Reluctantly, delegates began suspending their hopes for integration, opting for more immediate progress in race relations in the aftermath of Watts. By the

⁸⁵ James J. Kilpatrick, 'Civil rights vs. ancient principles of law', in *The Sunday Star*, 15 May 1966; 'Civil rights conference', in the *Evening Star*, 7 June 1966, general area – press clippings, *Records of the WHCCR*. Kilpatrick must have been a recent convert to colour-blindness. In 1964 David Danzig called him 'probably the most effective segregationist thinker in the South' (David Danzig: 'Rightists, racists, and separatists: a rightist bloc in the making?', *Commentary* (Aug. 1964).

⁸⁶ McPherson, *A political education*, pp. 61–2.

⁸⁷ Many books recently published confirm this unfortunate fact. Among the best are Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American apartheid* (Chicago, 1993), and Andrew Hacker, *Two nations* (Princeton, N.J., 1992).

spring conference, the project that had inspired a generation of political liberals was already, as one observer put it, 'dead on arrival', more by neglect than design. Interestingly, liberals, conservatives, and the most militant civil rights activists lost their belief in the viability of integration at the same time.

Without the appearance of progress, the American problem of racial equality became an entirely negative question: had the system failed blacks or had blacks failed the system? The consequences of a definitive answer to this question forced the administration to attempt to suppress the question at the spring conference. Race no longer was discussed in the clear moral and political terms of civil rights; instead, racial divisions featured as an unstated and discomforting reminder of the failed promises of the Great Society. Discussions since the mid-sixties focus on the alleviation of immediate problems affecting race relations, the aim being compromise rather than resolution. Moynihan would later advise Nixon that the issue would benefit from a period of 'benign neglect', not without reason.⁸⁸

Irreparable damage had already been done to many post-war political institutions by the time Johnson realized the potential for destruction the issue had for his administration. Perhaps the most significant evidence the conference provides is that the liberal coalition behind the Great Society began to disintegrate over the issue that had brought it together, before Vietnam destroyed it altogether. Disenchantment with Johnson's attempt to enforce American democratic ideals both at home and abroad hinged on the impossibility and futility of the project; the link between the two issues in 1965 surely comes across no clearer than in John P. Roche's statement at the fall conference. The political will which Johnson understood was necessary for the prosecution of his aims breaks down, almost page by page, throughout the transcripts of the fall conference. Johnson, personifying American liberalism in his unyielding belief that political will and moral leadership would resolve any problem in American society, was clearly doomed before Vietnam became a focus of generalized opposition.

⁸⁸ While many rightly blamed Nixon for following this advice, it might be pointed out that liberals and radicals have also shied away from answering this seminal question, making the Vietnam war the focus of political and moral protest rather than the longer-lasting question of race.