

Violence Troubles Civil Rights Efforts

Many celebrated the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet for some African Americans, things had not changed much. In many urban areas, there was anger and frustration over continuing discrimination and poverty. That anger exploded into violence in several cities.

Disorder in the Cities Less than a week after Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, one of the worst race riots in American history erupted in the predominantly African American neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles. Violence, looting, and arson spread for several days before National Guard troops restored order.

Watts was one of many race riots that erupted in the 1960s. The worst violence occurred in Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan, in the summer of 1967. In Detroit, 43 people died, and property damage reached \$50 million. The outbursts frightened many white Americans.

In most previous race riots, whites had used violence to keep African Americans "in their place." But now, blacks were using violence against police and white business owners in black neighborhoods.

Investigating the Race Riots To determine the causes of the riots, President Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the **Kerner Commission**. It concluded that long-term racial discrimination stood as the single most important cause of violence. The commission also recommended establishing and expanding federal programs aimed at overcoming the problems of America's urban ghettos.

Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal. . . . Segregation and poverty have created the racial ghetto and a destructive environment totally unknown to most Americans.


—National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, Report, 1967

The Kerner Commission's findings proved highly controversial. A number of conservative commentators argued against expanding federal spending.

They said that this amounted to rewarding the rioters. Others noted that the black-white split that the report described ignored other minorities.

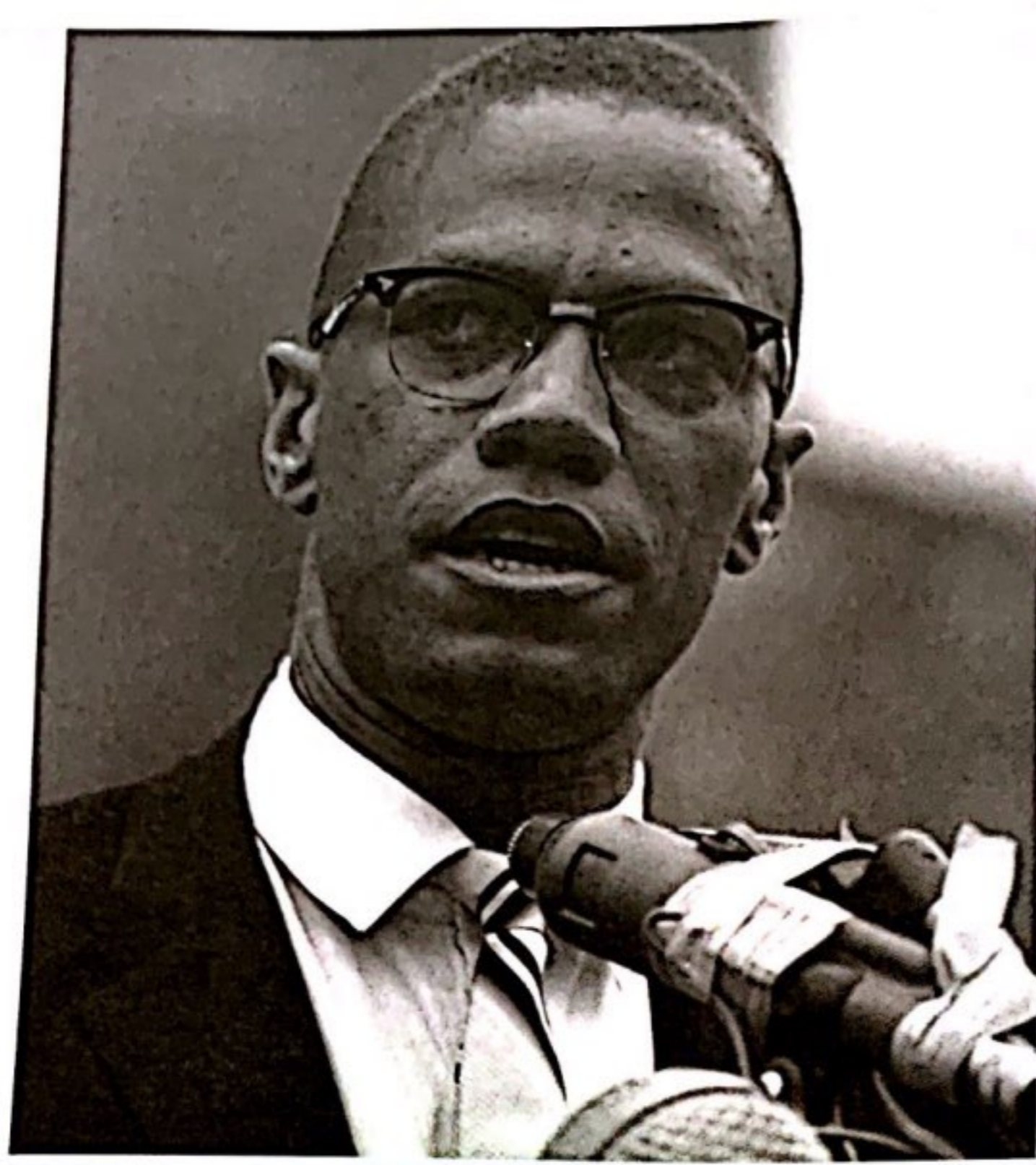


>> During the 1960s, race riots, like this one in Detroit, often left significant parts of largely African American neighborhoods burned out or otherwise destroyed.

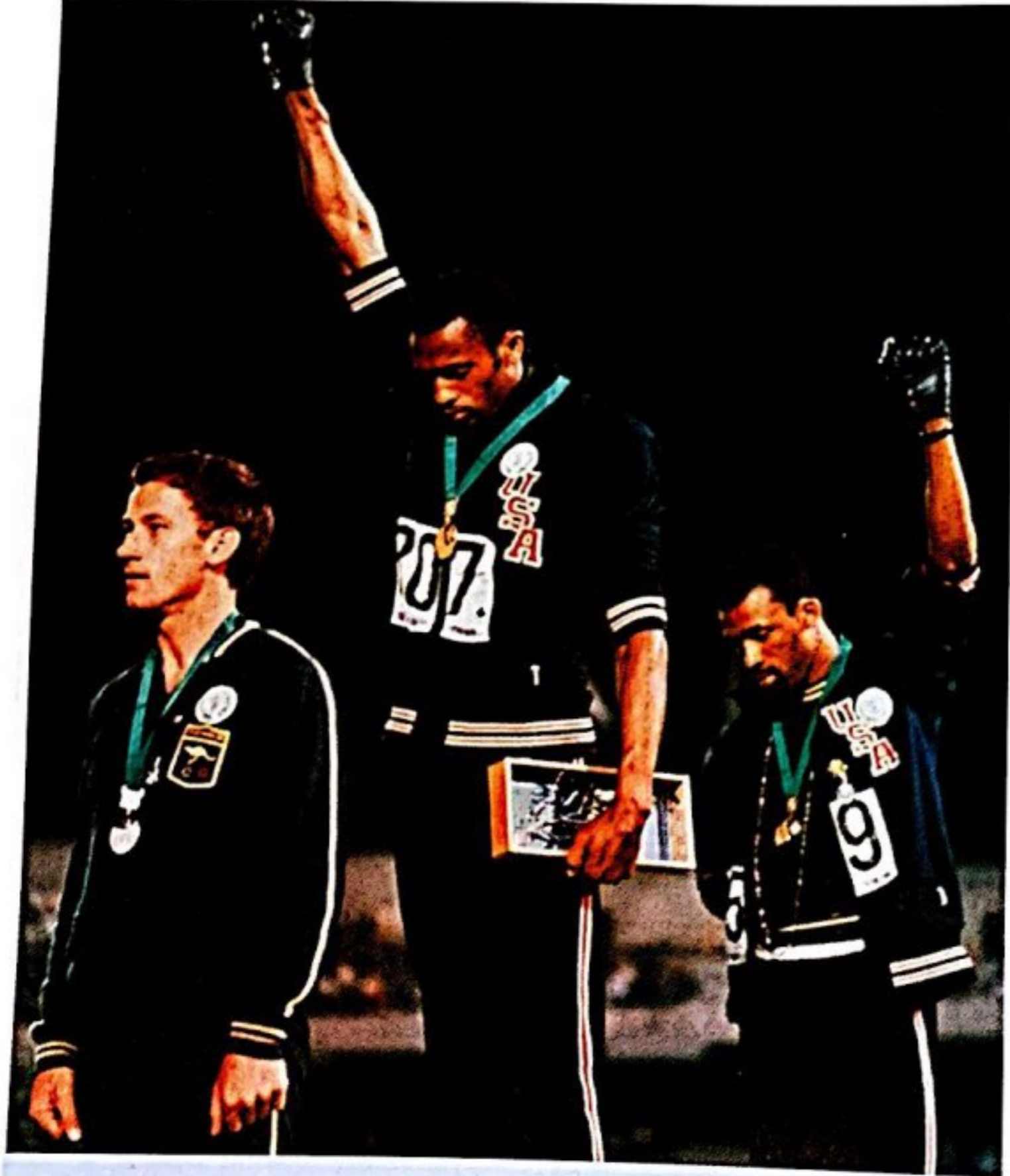
 [Interactive Map](#)



>> Conservative critics argued that the Kerner Commission did not satisfactorily explain why the riots occurred.



>> Malcolm X speaks to a crowd at the Unity Rally in Harlem, New York City, on June 29, 1963. He drew criticism from many civil rights activists for his belief that the races should be separated.



>> At the 1968 Summer Olympic Games, U.S. athletes Tommie Smith, center, and John Carlos, right, raise their gloved fists to show their support for the black-power movement.

commission's recommendations, largely follow up on the Vietnam War was consuming enormous sums of federal money. The riots also fueled a white backlash. Many whites opposed further reforms. However, the private sector stepped in to create economic opportunities for citizens. In 1967, the life insurance industry formed an Urban Problems Committee of CEOs who created a "Billion Dollar Urban Investment Program" to provide investments for low- and moderate-income housing and job-creating enterprises in poor urban areas.

? RECALL Why was the Kerner Commission formed?

New Civil Rights Groups

The racial rioting of the mid-1960s coincided with the radicalization of many African Americans, particularly young urban African Americans. Rather than advocating nonviolence and integration, they called for another approach.

Malcolm X Offers a Different Vision The most well-known African American radical was **Malcolm X**, who was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1925. He adopted the X to represent his lost African name. Little, he argued, was his slave name. Malcolm had a difficult childhood. In his teens, he moved to Boston and then to New York City, where he became involved in drugs and crime and landed in prison on burglary charges at age 21.

While in prison, Malcolm became a convert to the **Nation of Islam**, a religious sect headed by Elijah Muhammad. The group prescribed strict rules of behavior, including no drugs or alcohol, and demanded a separation of the races.

After his release from prison, Malcolm became the Nation of Islam's most prominent minister. In this role, he preached a message of self-reliance and self-protection. He called for black pride and spread the idea of black nationalism, a belief in the separate identity and racial unity of the African American community. Malcolm was a "charismatic speaker who could play an audience as great musicians play instruments." His dynamic speeches won many adherents to his cause.

In 1964, Malcolm X broke away from the Nation of Islam and formed his own organization. He then made a pilgrimage to Mecca, the holy city of Islam, afterward adopting the religious name el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. Returning to the United States, he seemed willing to consider limited acceptance of whites. In February 1965, however, Malcolm X was shot and killed. Three members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of the murder.

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The "Black Power" Movement Many young African Americans saw themselves as heirs of the radical Malcolm X. They began to move away from the principle of nonviolence. They also began to question the goal of integration. As SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael put it:

Integration . . . has been based on complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, blacks must move into a white neighborhood or send their children to a white school. This reinforces the notion . . . that 'white' is automatically better and 'black' is by definition inferior.

—Stokely Carmichael, "What We Want," 1966

Carmichael first used the term "**black power**" in 1966. In that year, James Meredith had set off on a "March Against Fear" across the state of Mississippi to encourage African Americans to register and vote. Meredith traveled only 20 miles before he was shot and left for dead by a white supremacist. SNCC, CORE, and SCLC members vowed to continue the march.

When they reached Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael and some other marchers were arrested. After his release, Carmichael told a crowd that African Americans needed "black power."

He later said that black power meant African Americans should collectively use their economic and political muscle to gain equality. Yet many white Americans felt threatened. They believed that black power meant black violence.

The Black Panthers' Approach Not long after Carmichael's "black power" speech, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. Almost overnight, the **Black Panthers** became the symbol of young militant African Americans. The Black Panthers organized armed patrols of urban neighborhoods to protect people from police abuse. They also created antipoverty programs, such as free breakfasts for poor African American children. The Black Panthers gained national attention when they entered the state capitol in Sacramento carrying shotguns and wearing black leather jackets and berets to protest attempts to restrict their right to bear arms.

The Panthers' style appealed to many young African Americans, who began to wear their hair in "Afros" and to refer to themselves as "black" rather than "Negro" or "colored."



>> At the University of California at Berkeley, Stokely Carmichael advocated combining the economic, social, and political power of African Americans to achieve civil rights.



>> Members and sympathizers demonstrate their support for Black Panther leader Huey Newton as he stands trial for the murder of an Oakland police officer in Alameda County, California.