

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Reading the L.A. Riot

A Survey of Recent Articles

The fires were still smoldering in South-Central Los Angeles last May when the debate about the riot's underlying causes commenced. At the root of the burning and killing and looting of April 29–May 3, 1992, the Bush administration maintained, were the failed Great Society programs of the 1960s. On the contrary, asserts writer Mike Davis in the *Nation* (June 1, 1992): "The 1992 riot and its possible progenies must . . . be understood as insurrections against an intolerable political-economic order."

It hardly took the destructive L.A. riot (51 dead, more than \$700 million in damages) to make the putatively intolerable nature of the existing political-economic order apparent to the *Nation's* readers, or to make the failings of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society apparent to the Bush administration. "What we are seeing in the inner city [is] essentially the grim harvest of the Great Society," U.S. Attorney General William P. Barr told a nationwide television audience before the Simi Valley jury even delivered its incendiary verdict of not guilty on most of the charges against four Los Angeles police officers accused in the beating of Rodney King. The "breakdown of the family structure," Barr said, was largely the result of "welfare policies." This view is "manifestly absurd," asserts New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the *Public Interest* (Summer 1992). "The breakdown was there in the data before the Great Society, just as the welfare system was there," notes the author of the once-controversial 1965 report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."

But Charles Murray, author of the still-controversial *Losing Ground* (1984), comes to the administration's support in *Commentary* (July 1992). "The conditions in South-Central Los Angeles in 1992 that produced the riot," he declares, "are importantly a product of those reforms of a quarter-century ago." Within the inner city, he says, youths now live in "a governmental and policy environment only marginally different from the one that had evolved by the early 1970s." Welfare, despite "the endlessly repeated claim" that the purchasing power of benefits has fallen sharply, "remains

more generous than it was during the heyday of the '60s reforms," once noncash benefits such as food stamps, Medicaid, and housing subsidies are counted along with Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The inner city's "social dynamics" have taken on a life of their own, Murray claims. The proportion of babies born to single black women has continued to rise, and unemployment of young black males remains well above the levels of the 1960s.

In the quarter-century since the 1967 riots in Detroit (43 dead), Newark (25 dead), and other U.S. cities, Robert Lukefahr of the Washington-based Madison Center for Educational Affairs observes in *Freedom Review* (July–Aug. 1992), black Americans have made great progress (as, indeed, they had *before* the Great Society programs were begun). The poverty rate among blacks has fallen 11 percentage points; the infant mortality rate has dropped from 32.6 per 1,000 births to 18.6, and life expectancy has increased from 65.3 years to 69.2. The ranks of the black middle class have swelled, and overt racism has diminished. Nevertheless, Lukefahr adds, many of the problems identified in the Kerner Commission report on the 1967 disorders—including "the illegitimate birth rate . . . the spiraling crime rate . . . unemployment [and] the destruction of the family"—are much worse than they were.

In its 1968 report, the Kerner Commission

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warned that America was becoming "two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Most of the rioters, and most of the dead and injured, in the 1967 disorders, as in the 1965 riot in the Watts section of Los Angeles, were black. The commission blamed "white racism" for the "explosive mixture" in the cities that led to the violence.

Los Angeles this year presented a different spectacle: a multiethnic riot. "This time," writes syndicated columnist Raoul Lowery Contreras of San Diego in *Reason* (Aug.–Sept. 1992), "it was blacks against whites; blacks against Hispanics; blacks against Asians (particularly Koreans); and Hispanics against blacks, whites, Asians, and other Hispanics." The death toll included 26 blacks, 14 Hispanics, eight whites, and two Asians. Of the first 5,000 rioters arrested from all over Los Angeles, more than half were Hispanic; only 38 percent were black. Of the 2,700 Hispanics arrested, some 1,500 were suspected of being in the country illegally.

In one tragedy among many, a Korean-American boy mistaken for a looter was fatally shot by Koreans seeking to protect their property. "Without the [Korean] men on the roofs with guns," however, Edward Norden asserts in the *American Spectator* (Sept. 1992), the devastation of property would have been even greater than it was. Some 1,867 Korean-owned businesses around Los Angeles were looted or torched, and about \$350 million in Korean-owned real estate and goods was "transformed into rubble or gleefully carted away."

In South-Central Los Angeles (55 percent of whose residents are black; 45 percent, Hispanic) and nearby Koreatown (68 percent Hispanic, 27 percent Asian, 5 percent black), enterprising Korean immigrants, Norden writes, assumed "the traditional Jewish role of man-in-the-middle, the custom-made scapegoat, the merchant on his own in a neighborhood where the big chains and the banks fear to tread, setting his own prices and squirreling away the profit to pay [for] his children's [education]. His customers . . . are always liable to believe that he is gouging them."

One of the first Korean-owned stores attacked by rampaging black youths was a grocery store in which a 15-year-old black girl was shot to death last year by a Korean grocer, in a dispute over a bottle of soda. The girl's name, Latasha Harlins, was little mentioned on TV, but it was, insists the *Nation's* Mike Davis, "the key to the catastrophic collapse of relations between L.A.'s black and Korean communities."

Ever since a judge let the grocer off with a fine, Davis asserts, "some interethnic explosion has been virtually inevitable."

The spark that set off the riot was the verdict in the Rodney King case. To most Americans who had "seen" the videotape of the beating King received, the acquittal of the white police officers seemed an obvious miscarriage of justice. (Federal civil rights charges have since been filed against the officers; they have pleaded not guilty.) But the *American Lawyer's* (June 1992) Roger Parloff, who watched much of the trial and provides a detailed analysis of the blows delivered and the evidence presented, thinks that the California jury may well have been right in its verdict. Charles Peters' *Washington Monthly* (Sept. 1992) salutes Parloff's careful journalism, but finds his reading of the videotape to be "occasionally overgenerous; he all but excuses a series of blows at the moment that King surrenders. But one needn't agree with his conclusion to appreciate that the details of this trial were widely, even irresponsibly, caricatured by the media and that race may have been far less relevant in this case than previously thought."

"Television news, particularly in its local manifestations, is not famous for explaining much of anything, but in the aftermath of the riots, it tried hard," asserts *New York Times* TV critic Walter Goodman, writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (July–Aug. 1992). "Even before the fires were doused, the tube was awash in explanations, which sometimes verged on excuses, for the rage and despair caused by years of neglect." Print journalists took up this theme, too. The riot, writes Mike Davis, "was as much about empty bellies and broken hearts as it was about police batons and Rodney King."

But Midge Decter, writing in *Commentary* (July 1992), asks how anyone can now use the word "neglect," in speaking of the black underclass, when ever since the Moynihan report of 1965, "attention [has been] paid and paid and paid again," and Washington has spent more than a trillion dollars on the cities. Not even a quarter-century of failure, she observes, "has been enough to dislodge the belief that society at large must furnish the means—the magic program or school curriculum or legal reform—to make everything all right for the black underclass." And yet, she says, the harsh truth—visible anew in the flames of Los Angeles—is that for those in the underclass, "taking charge of their own lives is the *only* thing that will save them."