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Burned, Baby, Burned

Watts and the Tragedy of Black America

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Sunday, August 14, 2005; Page B01

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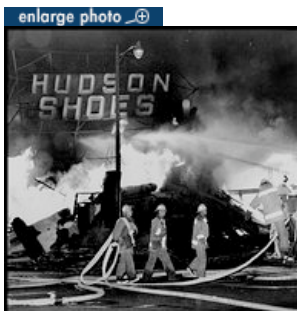
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While many people this month are focused on the controversy surrounding the 40th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, I have another civil-rights-related 40th anniversary on my mind. On Aug. 11, 1965, the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles broke out in flames on the nation's television screens. Many cherish the memory as the moment when the militant became mainstream in a "fed-up" black America, replacing the nonviolent, gradualist efforts of old-guard civil rights leaders. The Watts riot indeed shaped modern black American history more decisively than the Voting Rights Act. The question is whether it was in a good way.

In comparison with the polite sleeve-tugging and forms of nonviolent protest typical of the earlier civil rights generation, the sea change in 1965 may seem at first glance to have been an overdue response to the injustice that black America had endured for so long. But after researching the riot and the policies established in its aftermath, I have come to a different conclusion. In teaching poor blacks that picturesque battle poses were an "authentic" substitute for constructive intentions, the "Burn, Baby, Burn" ethos ultimately did more harm than good to a people who had already been through more than enough.



The eternal question about the riots has been: Why did they happen just then? Leaders like Martin Luther King were baffled about this at the time, and the question is still relevant to assessing the black condition. In 1965, black Americans had been dealing with the short end of the stick for almost 400 years. If black American history from the early 1600s to 2005 could be condensed to 24 hours, then these riots took place at 10 p.m. Why not before?



Scorched earth: The author argues that the riots in Watts launched a new -- and misguided -- tactic of menacing protest and rebellion for its own sake in the struggle for civil rights. (A Shoe Store In Watts Collapsing In Flames, Aug. 14, 1965 -- Associated Press)

The Watts riot began when white police officers stopped an intoxicated black driver in South Central Los Angeles. He resisted arrest and was forcibly subdued. A rumor quickly spread that the officers had beaten a pregnant black woman, and a growing mob started throwing rocks and bottles at the cops. The incident snowballed into a five-day conflagration, with blacks destroying a thousand businesses. Thirty-four people died, more than 1,000 were hospitalized and nearly 4,000 were arrested.

This was the first episode in a series of "long hot summers" in the late '60s, when blacks went on to riot and loot in one city after another. The Detroit rendition two years later was especially horrific, with 43 deaths, more than 7,200 arrests, and about 2,500 stores trashed.

The conventional wisdom at the time was that blacks were rebelling against the conditions they were forced to live in. I was born two months after Watts, but growing up, this was the justification I heard time and again. The Watts rioters lived in an America where about one in three black families lived below the poverty line while just a little more than one in 10 white families did. Twice as many black as white men were unemployed. Redlining policies barring blacks from white neighborhoods were in force until the Fair Housing Act of 1968 -- and under the table, even afterward.

But even so, there were a few too many things about the Watts riot and the later ones that did not quite make sense if they were to be seen as the outcome of injustice.

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For one thing, these were the first urban race riots driven by blacks instead of whites. Before this, race riots in American cities involved white bigots storming into black neighborhoods and terrorizing residents, often because of rumors that a black man had "assaulted" a white woman, as was the case when whites torched the prosperous black quarter of Tulsa in 1921. For struggling blacks, burning down their own neighborhoods only became a part of the protest vocabulary in the mid-'60s -- just as the Great Society was getting into gear. Moreover, black rioters in Watts ruined black-owned businesses as lustily as white ones, even when stores had "Soul Brother" signs in the window. How was this a rebellion against racism?

Another strange thing: The worst riots happened in places where conditions for blacks were best. If one had to predict in August 1965 where black-led riots might be most likely, the obvious choice would have been the deep South. And yet, very few of the riots in the late '60s took place in the most bigoted region in America: There was no memorable race riot in Atlanta or Birmingham. As for Watts, just the year before the riots, the National Urban League had rated Los Angeles the best city in the nation for blacks to live in. Several studies have shown no correlation between the destructiveness of the black-led riots in a given city and conditions for blacks there.

Some suppose that the Civil Rights Act had dangled before blacks a promise of improvement that seemed to bear no fruit. But the Watts riot happened just one year after the Civil Rights Act came into effect. It is an insult to say that blacks would burn their own neighborhoods down in fury because America was not a brand-new place just months after passage of this legislation, as if change ever occurs that fast. And there had been smaller black-led riots in a few places such as Harlem and Rochester in July of 1964 -- just after the Civil Rights Act was signed.

In general, black America had been "fed up" for centuries before 1965. A useful black history must identify a different factor that sparked the events in Watts and across the land. This factor was a new mood. Only in the 1960s did a significant number of blacks start treating rebellion for its own sake -- rebellion as performance, with no plan of action behind it -- as political activism.

This did not come from nowhere, to be sure -- and where it came from was whites. In the '60s, it became a hallmark of moral sophistication among whites to reject establishment mores, culminating in the counterculture movement. The movement was based initially on laudable intentions: Few today could condemn young, informed whites for rising up against political censorship, racism and later the Vietnam War, or a newly concerned white ruling class for turning its attention to poverty and its disproportionate impact on black people.

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