

RECOGNITION OF EXCELLENCE

The L.A. Riots: Today and Tomorrow

- Matthew Lam -

The L.A. Riots were a series of riots, lootings, and other criminal acts that took place in 1992. These riots were initially caused by the acquittal of police officers who were filmed committing a violent act of police brutality. The riots would begin; starting from the day the verdict was given, and intensify over the next two days. Fifty-three people would die. Ten of them would be killed by police and military forces. In addition, about two thousand people would be injured. Total loss would be estimated to between 800 million and 1 billion dollars. Although the riots started out as a reaction to the unfair judgement of the court, it soon became a reflection of the racial tensions that had slowly been rising in L.A. One victim, Reginald Oliver Denny, a white truck driver, was dragged out of his van and beaten by a mob of black residents, which would force him to undergo years of rehabilitation and permanently damage his ability to speak and walk. All racial groups in the area were affected, especially Korean and other Asian ethnicities. Because many Korean and Asian owned stores were targeted, some owners would form military groups such as the Korea Young Adult Team of Los Angeles. Many of these groups would be heavily armed. Military and police forces would eventually get the rioting under control; however, racial tensions remained at a high.

The long term effects of the riots affect our community even today. The L.A. Riots brought along the need for change in the community. For instance, one popular movement strived to reduce the amount of liquor stores in South Los Angeles. Not only did liquor stores encourage addiction to alcohol, they also charged more for ordinary products than regular grocery stores did. African Americans banded together to organize the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment. Their efforts would lead to more conditional use permits, which would allow residents to better control the hours and location of liquor stores. The riots also brought the empowerment zone movement to the spotlight. The empowerment

zone was a concept in which the government would give employers currency to establish themselves in impoverished areas. However, this movement proved to be unsuccessful, as employment rates did not increase or decrease, possibly due to the high amount of homeless people living in those areas. In addition, the riots also created a movement for reformation of the police force. The Christopher Commission, created by Tom Bradley, major of Los Angeles at the time, outlined the different problems in the police force, including the use of excessive force caused by racism or bias and the failure to control or punish these officers accordingly. Even the complaint system problem was brought into the light as the commission revealed that out of the 2,152 complaints of excessive force between 1986 and 1990, only 42 were actually addressed. Today, police officers are rarely seen using the side-handled metal batons that could inflict serious damage, and instead, now use non-lethal weapons such as pepper spray and beanbag rounds. In addition, the complaints that had been put aside for so long were formally investigated by Internal Affairs or the police chain of command. The greatest change, however, would be the social remodeling of South Los Angeles. In the past, it was greatly renowned for its overwhelmingly African American population and high crime rate. Now, a large Latino population has also taken root in this area leading to a burst of economic activity led by the Latinos. Although most of the poorer African Americans who had been living in the area moved to more affordable places such as Nevada and Riverside, many middle class African Americans have since moved in. This new African American population has been active in using its political and cultural influence through its organized campaigns and events.

In the future, some of the effects of the L.A. riots will remain and some will not. For example, as the Places Journal states, "If the demographic trends of the past two decades continue, we can reasonably expect South Los Angeles to be about 20 to 25 percent African

American by the next census, in 2020; at which point there may no longer remain any visible legacies of the riots of 1992.” However, the effects of the liquor store movement and the police reformation will probably stand for a long time or even evolve to become a more successful movement. The Riots have affected Los Angeles a tremendous amount, but most importantly, it has taught us how to stop something like this from ever happening again.

Works Cited

1. Josh Sides, “20 Years Later: Legacies of the Los Angeles Riots,” *Places Journal*, April 2012. Accessed 12 Apr 2015. <https://placesjournal.org/article/20-years-later-legacies-of-the-los-angeles-riots/>
2. "1992 Los Angeles Riots." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 12 Apr. 2015.