

Southern California Disasters Visited Series

A VINDICATION BY HATRED 1992

written: June 13, 1992

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Los Angeles Riot—1992

(One man's account of the costliest civil disturbance in the United States since the Civil War)

All went smoothly at work Wednesday, April 29. In the evening I watched a movie on cable television and was ready to turn in at a little after 10:00 o'clock P.M.. (I would be sleeping on the enclosed back porch out of respect for an especially poignant earthquake dream the night before.) Just before turning off the TV I listened to the day's events news headlines. It would have been better for my night's rest had I not done this last act.

The jury for the Rodney King vs. four LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) officers had given their verdict earlier in the day. A Ventura County¹, all-White jury had unanimously acquitted the officers of every count of police brutality brought against them. This was despite damning evidence to the contrary provided by explicit video coverage showing the police beating the Afro-American, Rodney King, senseless, breaking some bones.

The entire nation, including President George Bush, was shocked by the absurdity and obvious unfairness (racial bias) of the verdict. By the time I heard the news that night, rioting had been going on in south-central Los Angeles for hours. Dozens of building fires were already started, stores were being looted, people killed, and there was general, mass destruction of real and personal property.

Right after news of the verdict hit the streets, certain Blacks began pulling luckless White people, that happened to be in the area at absolutely the wrong time, from their vehicles and beating them with fists, hammers, fire extinguishers, ceramic lamps, whatever was handy. One truck driver was beaten to death. Another would have died had it not been for the help of three Black men and one Black woman. At their own risk they helped him to reach a hospital. The "lucky" truck driver went into coma before he arrived. Then it took many hours of reconstructive neural surgery before the announcement came (a couple of days later) that he would live.

I and the world were shown the beating of both truck drivers in the news encapsulation. I then tried to sleep. No way! In the distance I could hear police and fire sirens screaming and occasionally the agitated, raised voices of people on Lake Avenue. This was just the beginning.

Thursday, April 30, did not go smoothly. I went to work, but things were not "business as usual" at JPL (the California Institute of Technology's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, located in Pasadena) or anywhere else in Los Angeles County. The rioting, looting, burning and inhuman treatment by certain humans of each other had continued throughout the night and into the day.

(In fact, things did not quiet down until early Saturday. By then President George Bush had called in the National Guard, and Vice President Dan Quayle had flown in to inspect the damage.

While in the area Quayle took special care to insult the moral fiber of Southern California even to the point of putting blame for the moral decay on TV shows like *Murphy*

¹A change of venue to Ventura County had been carried out because there was concern that too much publicity and high feelings in Los Angeles County might result in injustice. Unfortunately, Ventura County was a bad choice in that it was financially affluent, not mixed well racially (being mostly inhabited by Caucasians), and not particularly sympathetic to the plight of a Black man from the ghetto.

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Brown. This series was about the antics of a woman TV executive named Murphy Brown. During the week of the riots, Brown gave birth, as part of that week's episode, to a "fatherless" child (i.e., a bastard), which she loved and intended to raise even though it meant doing so alone. Quayle accused the series of undermining the very moral values that had made this country what it was today.

Of course, this accusation immediately opened the door to questions like "What should she have done with, or to, the unborn child? Abort it?" Because Quayle had made the statements "off-the-cuff," without thought of, or research into ultimate consequences, he was unprepared to go further than merely continue crying "moral corruption!" Thus he blamed the show (especially the "liberal thinking" spawning it), in principle, for the riots.

Having the Vice President make an inspection of the damage was fully expected and a positive direction for the federal government to take. But then to have him lambaste us for moral turpitude, when the real issues were racism and biased "justice," went too far in the wrong direction.

Quayle the albatross would be Bush's running mate in the 1992 presidential election. I suspect that his juvenile behavior and simplistic thinking will most definitely set Bush back several steps in public opinion. (President Bush would also make an inspection of the area just before the June 2 California presidential primary.)

At JPL, nearly everybody had either a TV or radio tuned to news. It seemed like the social contract, something we (I) take for granted in day-to-day living, was being folded, spindled, and especially, mutilated. Unfortunately, the extensive TV coverage of fires, looting, shootings and other mayhem initially did little to stop the proceedings.

I strongly suspect that many of the looters were people who had been watching the news and seen that police were unequal to extensive, spontaneous, simultaneous crime. The seemingly ordinary people with not inaccessible criminal tendencies, who were normally kept in check by fear of the Authorities, suddenly received untypical opportunities during civilization's momentary suspension. Whole families, including children, helped themselves to free goodies that would eventually cost them more than they could ever imagine.

Disturbances were advertised far and wide by all TV and radio stations. Later I believe people, both criminal and non, went beyond mere shock at what we were seeing and hearing. We were staggered by the evil and other products of hatred being unleashed hourly, and deeply conscious of possible far reaching consequences should this uncontrolled, "uncivil" chain reaction be prolonged. A powerful social reaction to the upheaval was then prompted into action. The healing process began, and the convulsions slowly ebbed.

Despite what seemed like the world coming down around us, JPL put in a full day. When I drove home after work, I was surprised at how much smoke filled the air. It was difficult to breathe. The air inhaled stung my lungs. Driving down Orange Grove Boulevard, everything seemed surreal. It was so smoky that visibility was reduced significantly. Yet there were still the perennial joggers, people walking their dogs, and at least one little boy riding a bicycle in a front yard.

I tried during the evening not to watch overmuch about the riots. What I did see continued to be grim at best. A veritable holocaust. Many more fires had been, and were being, set. Mixed messages were being sent and received, as rational people surfaced from the chaos to sort through what they thought were the reasons for what was being called the costliest civil

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upheaval since the Civil War. The actor Edward Almos was a top spokesman for the downtrodden. He blamed much of the looting on extreme poverty and accumulated hatred.

The Korean community was especially hard hit. It was now more than evident that some major negative feelings between the Blacks and Koreans had gone on too long, squelched, undissipated and forced to smolder below the surface.

Many stores in the south-central portion of Los Angeles were owned and run by Koreans. Yet the Koreans, themselves, tended to live in better areas away from the inner-city. This powder keg area was essentially Afro-American in population, incidentally with a high number of Hispanics. Over the years it became a matter of the haves (Koreans) profiting off the have-nots (generally low-income people, whose lives were hopelessly locked into the neighborhood by multi-generational cycles of poverty encouraged and fed by grievous errors in education and attitudes).

The stores were convenient, plus many of the have-nots lacked transportation other than city buses, so they bought from the haves using their precious little money. Meanwhile, the prices at these stores tended to be high. There was the high cost of insurance for doing business in a "redlined" area, rising sales tax (now at 8.5%, with *additional* "nuisance" taxes on alcohol, snack foods, etc.), inflation, and the Koreans' desire to make profit (typical for anybody in business).

Locals resented the high prices, and this sponsored a hatred that added fuel to whatever other social rubs may have been happening between the races.

Among the "social rubs" in not very distant memory was the killing of a teenage Black girl by a Korean woman convenience store owner. The shooting was captured on the store's security camera and was plastered over every news broadcast for several days after the event and during the subsequent trial.

The tape showed a somewhat violent argument between the Korean and the Black, in which the Korean accused the girl of trying to steal a small bottle of orange juice. The Korean grabbed the girl's backpack, possibly to check for more stolen merchandise, and the girl grabbed it back, hitting the Korean in the process. Finally, the girl left the orange juice on the counter and started walking towards the exit. The Korean pulled a gun from under the counter and shot the girl point blank in the back of the head.

The trial was much publicized, and the jury verdict was "guilty." However, Los Angeles Supreme Court Judge Karlin didn't believe that the Korean woman was at heart a criminal, so she gave the woman probation. As could be expected the Black community was aghast at the decision and immediately began protesting in front of the judge's home. (Incidentally, Judge Karlin was reaffirmed as Superior Court judge during the June 2 primary election).

Many people, myself included, believe that the extensive concentration of damage to the Korean commercial community was a direct result of the latter failure of justice, ignited by the former (the Rodney King affair). The only Korean stores in the area that were not adversely affected were those guarded by their owners and hired men with guns at the ready. It was guns and the old west again.

After the riots finally subsided and the Korean store owners inspected their blackened property and calculated their losses, a movement of "we love our neighbors" suddenly arose. Korean and Black leaders began meeting to discuss inter-racial matters, and a genuine

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movement of reconciliation was begun. (Hopefully this will help the otherwise intolerable and intolerant situation).

NOTE: To show that the attacks against the Koreans were not simply anti-Oriental, LA's China town, Japan town and Vietnam town districts went virtually untouched.

Friday night, May 1, I again slept on the back porch. It was so smoky outside that I was forced to close a window that normally allowed in sweet, cool, nighttime air. Today at JPL had once again been business as usual, at least for most of the day. Then JPL announced that it was letting all non-essential people off at 3:00 o'clock P.M.. For me it meant the loss of some income, since I only got paid for the hours worked. Yet I was happy to go home.

JPL's reasoning for letting us off early was to give everybody a chance to reach home before nightfall. Personal safety steadily decreased as the sun lowered on the horizon. Also, because of fires and various other incidents along their routes, several freeways were either gridlocked or closed altogether.

I was in touch with family in Michigan, so they knew I was all right. Charlene and Bob called, and we talked for several minutes. They wanted to hear my witness of what was going on. The son of one of their parishioners was killed while waiting for a bus downtown Los Angeles. He was a young Black man.

Nearly fifty people died during the riots/looting/burning. Two black men were found shot to death in a body shop parking lot about 1/2 block from where I live. The men were found Saturday morning, May 2. Even firemen were not exempt from being hurt. Several were injured, and some killed (including being shot), while attempting to do their sworn duty, put out fires.

The news media was gluttonous, in the process exposing reporters to very possible death or injury so as to be first at as many scenes of horror or heartbreak as possible. Some reporters were hurt. Nearly all, especially the white ones, were shot at or beaten. The safest were either Hispanic or Black, but there were no guarantees. One's race might make a difference. It depended on the orientation and hatreds of the gang one happened upon. It was a time of lunacy, mayhem, criminality, fires, loss, terror, villains, heroes, and social introspection.

By late Friday night and Saturday morning things were beginning to calm down. Curfew had been imposed on Los Angeles starting Thursday night and going into effect from sunset to sunrise. Also, as mentioned earlier, the National Guard had been called out. They arrived throughout the weekend and were stationed in the city's hot spots to help cool things down. Some of these were shot at, and some had to do some shooting, themselves. But these latter incidents were few, scattered, and diminished quickly.

It was now time to assess the damage. The psychological harm to children, of course, would be incalculable. Psychological and sociological damage to the Korean community was traumatic. Many store owners lost everything. Whole shopping centers had disappeared. Grocery stores that had served tens of thousands of people were in smoldering ruins or, if lucky, only stripped of contents. Suddenly, sufficiency of food supply for the inner and south-central parts of the city came into question. And in a county where the homeless rate was already high and growing daily, many additional people, their homes/apartments burned, now found themselves on the streets, penniless and without a roof for protection.

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In after word, since the Rodney King injustice there have been several other jury verdicts handed down acquitting more police officers of misconduct charges. Once the message has been made perfectly clear that American justice is only good for Whites or certain other ethnic groups, the Black and Hispanic gangs will join forces and bring about their own justice. Already the gangs, formerly each others most lethal enemies, are trying to dialog. So far the police have been successful in breaking up these pow-wows. The Los Angeles Police Department, a very culpable entity in all this, is scared silly. You might say "it has seen the elephant," in old, pioneer terms.

Elsewhere in the United States and Canada there have been other riots spawned by the Los Angeles holocaust, though none were nearly as bad. Had we learned better from the 1965 riots, perhaps the 1992 disturbance would not have been necessary. What concerns me the most is the possibility of things returning to *status quo* as happened after the 1965 Watts riots, the second-worst in our country's history. If the trend towards larger and more intense disturbances continues, perhaps the next one will be better organized. Such a phenomenon could result in some form of new political institution better able (or at least willing) to recognize the legal and human rights of more than just a few lucky races or economic brackets. Most likely, though, not.

Pasadena and most outlying communities fared relatively well during the fiasco. Pasadena lost a group of stores in an old building complex that burned. There were a few gangs roaming the streets. And there was occasional looting, as gangs and other groups of people hit a few stores. I saw no looting personally, though I saw smashed-in store fronts here and there. Mostly what I saw were White, Black, Brown, and Yellow people looking very frightened and ready for things to go back to normal, flawed though normal might be.

Among the many consequences of the riots, many cities, counties and states are reevaluating their own justice systems, and even today laws are being sponsored to reduce the chances of such miscarriages of justice from happening again. Also of note, Ventura County is in the process of billing Los Angeles County for whatever damages were done to its residents' property due to their citizens' verdict.

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