

Recollections of the D.C. Riots: Forty Years Later

The Kojo Nnamdi Show

Wednesday April 2 & 9 2008

A Selection of Stories from Listener Email (edits done for clarity & length)

From Val

I remember my mother talking to my father that Thursday night....He was a reporter for the Baltimore Sun and his office was in the National Press Building at 14th and F. He told us of looking down onto F Street as the riots were going on that night, people smashing windows and dragging merchandise out of stores. He said one black D.C. policeman actually arrested one of the vandals, put him up against a building and held him there, while others were still grabbing things and running. The reporters called the D.C. dispatch, trying to get some help for this lone policeman in the midst of all that turmoil...

I don't know what actually happened to him, but when the riots are recalled, that is the image I have of that night.

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From Cindy

When the news of Dr. King's assassination spread, I went with friends to view the goings-on in the 14th Street area. I saw the looting and burning. Individuals used shopping carts to break store windows. Mothers were directing their children to get their right sizes. I also saw the Army Reserves bivouacked on the grounds of Soldiers Home. They and the police were mostly directing traffic. One soldier on 14th St. said his job was to keep anyone from going in the front of a particular store, but he was not responsible for the windows or the back doors. The crowd then descended on the other entries. A paint store exploded. It was pandemonium but also surreal, like being in the middle of a movie.

I was an African-American undergraduate student at Catholic University (CU), a predominantly white college. At one point, my dorm room soon filled with Caucasian classmates who were very afraid. They articulated rumors as bizarre as the story that Stokely Carmichael had an army marching through the city to burn Children's Hospital. I then departed from CU and went down to Howard University and stayed with friends at their dorms.

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From Larry

I was working at a segregated nite club - the Starlight - at 14th & Irving when people found out about Dr. King's assassination. I was a musician in a group fronted by a black singer - Steve Charles. We were playing at the time the news spread so at first we didn't know what had happened. All we saw was that businesses were being burned / looted. We heard a shot which I believe was the first casualty.

I was scared to death. We all hid in the kitchen until about 2:00 AM.

I'll never forget my trip out of DC that night. I wasn't stopping for anything or anybody. Eventually we left DC forever.

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From Sharon

I remember the day that Dr. King was killed vividly.

I was a nurse at St. Elizabeth's Hospital and we were told to report for duty throughout the uprising as essential personnel. I would drive to St Es past the Tidal Basin and the Cherry Blossoms while army jeeps and tanks patrolled the Capitol and Anacostia area. It was so disturbing and sad.

I can say that since then, only 9/11 here begins to compare. I have always worked with the DC community and am very encouraged to see us talking about race and its divisiveness.

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From Bruce in Washington, DC

A good portion of my family owned and ran businesses on H St., NE before the riots (including in the 100, 1200, and 1300 blocks of H) and I wanted to make the following comments:

1. A substantial portion of what led to the riots occurred years previously during the 1950s. First, immediately after the 1954 Brown Supreme Court decision a group of real estate agents engendered fear in the white middle class in DC, and promoted what was then known as "blockbusting," warning whites to move out because blacks were going to take over the city. At that time, my family lived (in the 5000 block) of South Dakota Ave., NE. My parents were the last whites to sell their house, and only then because my sister was scheduled to go to McKinley High School, which had become 95% black in a very short time. Instead, my parents moved to upper 16th St, NW so my sister could attend Coolidge, which was a truly integrated school.
2. Additionally, the renewal of what was a horrible slum in Southwest Washington was performed without any thought to what would happen to the poorest and virtually almost all black people who lived there. As a result, the poor blacks were removed and moved to H St., NE, 14th St. and Anacostia, all of which had previously been middle class and mixed among the races.
3. Almost every small businessman in DC in 1968 knew that riots were coming and that it would take only a spark to light the fire. Unfortunately, many of the professionals in the city had no appreciation of what was coming. My father's older brother was a dentist and a member of the NAACP and never believed my dad's warning that a riot was about to occur.
4. While I understand the anger and rage which was prevalent in the black community, the fact that some businesses were perpetuating injustices on those in the black community does not excuse what was indiscriminate burning of virtually all businesses, including many which had willingly employed blacks and had tried to integrate them into society. My grandmother Anna was one such person. The building in which her business had been housed and which she owned, (in the 1200 block) of H St., NE, was burned to the ground.
5. Other than merely being on the street holding rifles, the National Guard and other soldiers took no affirmative action to discourage anyone from looting. I still have a picture emblazoned in my mind of an 8 or 10 year old boy carrying a case of soda out of Binder's Liquor Store at Florida and West Virginia Ave., NE in front of a bunch of soldiers, without any of them doing anything.
6. Failure to redevelop the areas affected was due to three things: First, to a large extent DC had lost its middle class, including its small businessmen, few of whom were willing to come back. In other words, the city had evicted them and suburbia was welcoming. For example, a family friend who had his business on the 1300 block of H St, but moved to Wheaton in part because of the hostility that some had to business. Wouldn't it be wonderful had that business, which is known as one of the foremost places to go to buy and test musical instruments, stayed on the same block as the Atlas Theater?

Second, up until the Williams and Fenty administrations, the DC government was, at best, totally dysfunctional and cared little about working with the business community to bring business back into the city. We still see the legacy of ineffective government, among other things, in the school system, a consumer agency which is incapable of protecting tenants from unscrupulous landlords, and a social services agency which does nothing while a mother murders her children.

Finally, while there have always been some from all of the races who have been able to work well with one another, up until recently there have been far too many on all sides who are distrustful of others' motives and their ability to work together for a common purpose. As time passes, this inability to work together will improve.

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From Mary in Littlestown, Pennsylvania

I was a senior at Catholic University in 1968, living in Turkey Thicket, a great neighborhood in Northeast populated by a mix of mostly white college students and mostly black residents. My dad insisted that I come home (to Falls Church) since the University closed down. I tried to assure him that we were perfectly safe, but he wouldn't relent so I drove with my roommate to the closest border. The National Guard stopped us and searched my car, and for the first time I guess I realized how serious the situation really was.

I remember in the days following the riots that everyone in the Thicket seemed to be embarrassed to look directly at each other, as though we were all ashamed of our respective races. It took a while for us to become a neighborhood again.

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From Dee

I was 13 years old when the DC riots occurred. My uncle lived at Kennedy, Missouri, & Kansas in upper NW during this time and still live in the same community. We watched the neighborhood people destroy their own community. The riots spread from downtown to uptown and there were no controls in place (looting and burning of stores) and the policemen just stood and watch themselves.

The neighborhood has not been the same since that time. Community comeback is very slow. Whites then left the city in drove and DC then became Chocolate City. The word was out at the time that Whites will return and they will take their city back.

Regentrification has slowly made a return to a very different city. James Brown was requested to come to DC and quiet the city down and he wrote a song to bring calm people down so the National Guard and the Army could patrol and control the city.

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From Miranda

My father supervised a chain of drug stores in the District. I remember playing 'SPUD' ball in my backyard (2 blocks from the WAMU studio) and hearing the constant roar of fire trucks barreling downtown.

My father, part of the 'greatest generation' did not speak about the riots - the loss of the businesses he managed, the loss of friendships he had developed with the residents of the 14th Street location....

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From Judith, a retired teacher

I was teaching at Shaw Jr. High 7th and Rhode Island ave in April '68. On that Thurs. night after King died. There was a news black out so when I took the bus up 7th the next day, I discovered the store fronts broken out. We kept our students at Shaw and watched the fires across the street on 7th St. Around 2pm, the principal, Percy Ellis, asked some black teachers to take the 3 white teachers out of the area. For months after, my boys "visited " all the burned out stores and brought the "goodies" to school to buy, trade and sell. I was most amused at the boys who tried to sell me a "Rolodex" watch...I said that I already had one and showed it to him - it was on my desk.

Today, the houses behind the old Shaw- on Marion St. NW sell at starting prices of half a million dollars. So, where are the people going? Where is the new low income housing? There still are a few boarded up stores on 7th St. With JFK, Malcolm X, MLK and RFK...it was a terribly sad time and still I get tears about it.

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From "The Last Wave"

Regarding the 68 riots. My great uncle owned and operated J.W's restaurant, later revised as a Jazz lounge feat. Lady Byron, about 3 or 4 blocks down from U st. I'm afraid I cannot offer any great social or political insight giving my age. However, there's something to be said about tear gas and 10 plus hours of dunking ones head in the sink. While my uncle's business stayed open and wasn't looted, from our window we could see the local safeway, I think it was safeway... Some type of grocery store, start to blaze. There were gun shots in the ally and when we were finally able to leave we had to paint "soul brother / soul sister ok the car or "bad things would happen" as my uncle put it.

All in all I can tell my kids I was there in the middle of history in the making but I still have nightmares

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From Roslyn

I remember that we were living in Hyattsville at that time (grad students at the U of Md.), but we had friends who were an interracial couple and were living in Washington, not far from 14th Street. We called them to see how they were doing, and they asked if they could come and stay with us in the “suburbs” for a few days because “all Hell had broken out.” They were particularly concerned that as a black/white couple they might become targets.

Of course, we were happy to have them come stay with us, and they were glad to get away from the chaos.