

## Long, Hot Summers: Rethinking 1960s Urban Unrest Half a Century Later

### Introduction

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Half a century ago, the civil rights movement and its allies won stunning victories with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Together, these bills overturned a legal order sustaining generations of segregation and disfranchisement and transformed life for African Americans—indeed, all Americans—in the years that followed. Yet while these far-reaching laws were being enacted, American cities, north and south, exploded. In 1964, rioting broke out in Harlem. The following year, shortly after the signing of the Voting Rights Act, rioting followed the arrest of a young black man, ending days later after thirty-four had been killed, over a thousand people injured, and four thousand arrested. “The events of 1966 made it appear that domestic turmoil had become part of the American scene,” a federal commission concluded,<sup>1</sup> with violence occurring in perhaps forty cities, including Chicago, Cleveland, Dayton, and Omaha. The year 1967 only saw “urban disorders” intensify, with major conflicts in Detroit and Newark and, in the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968, violence again erupted across urban America.

What were the causes of the violence? The solutions? What did it all mean? How should the riots have been understood or interpreted? Americans were hardly of one mind when it came to debating these questions; today, historians, too, differ on their understandings of the racial violence of the 1960s.

To conservatives, the answer was simple: the violence signaled a breakdown of law and order, a civil rights movement gone too far, and radicals running amok. “I don’t think you need any more legislation,” the Mississippi Democratic representative Thomas G. Abernethy declared in 1967. “What you need now are some judges who

1. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968), 38.

will convict, a Justice Department that will prosecute, and a president who will turn his lawyers loose—that's all."<sup>2</sup> To the columnist Victor Riesel, the cause of the unrest was no mystery. "The hard core of rioters are a new breed," he explained. "This kind of warfare doesn't take manpower. It takes tightly knit disciplined cells. They're all over the big eastern cities . . . . If the President and his civil disorders committee seek an answer, they will have to concentrate on the new revolutionists and cage them before the cells coalesce and crush those who want to see the open blue sky as they reach upward—not the terrorists, snipers and clouds of smoke."<sup>3</sup>

To those in the Black Power movement and on the white New Left, the urban violence demonstrated the shallowness of American reform and represented a potentially revolutionary political upsurge captured in the terms *rebellion* and *insurrection*. Tom Hayden did not think that the aftermath of the Newark "rebellion" was a "time for radical illusions about 'revolution,'" but he did believe that the "conditions slowly are being created for an American form of guerrilla warfare based in the slums."<sup>4</sup> In their 1967 book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton identified the "core problem within the ghetto" as "the vicious circle created by the lack of decent housing, decent jobs and adequate education." Urban conditions created "dynamite in the ghettos," leading to "explosions of frustration, despair and hopelessness."<sup>5</sup> The larger society's responses hardly helped: it "becomes indignant and utters irrelevant clichés about marinating law and order," they added. "Blue ribbon committees of 'experts' and 'consultants' are appointed to investigate the 'causes of the riot.' They then spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on preparing 'authoritative' reports." But when the "dynamite does go off," they advised, "pious pronouncements of patience should not go forth" and blame shouldn't be placed on "'outside agitators' or on 'Communist influence' or on advocates of Black Power. That dynamite was placed there by white racism and it was ignited by white racist indifference and unwillingness to act justly."<sup>6</sup> On more than a few occasions, however, activists were willing to play the role of provocateur. The chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, H. Rap Brown, captured headlines when he declared at a rally in Cambridge, Maryland, in July 1967 that "it's time for Cambridge to explode, baby. Black folks built America and if America don't come around, we're going to burn America down."<sup>7</sup> Such words, not surprisingly, inflamed conservatives (and more than a few liberals) and fueled a political backlash; for others, those words were a warning that urgent and immediate action was imperative.

Moderates, black and white, shared the radicals' belief that conditions in America's cities accounted for the rioting. "Violence in the ghetto is the result of decades of oppression, deprivation and injustice for the Negro," complained Roy

2. "After Riots, What's Next? Leaders Grope for Answers," Kingston, NY, *Daily Freeman*, July 31, 1967.

3. Riesel, "Detroit's War like Vietnam's."

4. Hayden, *Rebellion in Newark*, 68–69.

5. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 155, 160.

6. *Ibid.*, 161–62.

7. "H. Rap Brown Suffers Wound by Shotgun," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1967.

Wilkins, the executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in 1966. “It’s ridiculous to blame it on the Negro.”<sup>8</sup> The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, tasked by President Lyndon Johnson to examine the annual outbreaks of violence, agreed. “Frustrated hopes are the residue of the unfulfilled expectations of the Civil Rights Movement and the dramatic struggle for equality rights in the South,” it found. At the heart of the issue was “white racism” and “pervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education and housing”; “alienation and hostility toward the institutions of law and government and the white society which controls them”; and a new “racial consciousness and solidarity” informing a “new mood” in which “self-esteem and enhanced racial pride are replacing apathy and submission to ‘the system.’”<sup>9</sup>

Understanding the causes of violence did not necessarily imply an endorsement of rioting. “Riots have proved ineffective, disruptive and highly damaging to the Negro population, to the civil rights cause and to the entire nation,” read a statement by four national civil rights leaders—the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, and Roy Wilkins—in the summer of 1967. While blacks should not submit “tamely” to their “present conditions,” they should “forgo the temptation to disregard the law.” Besides, African Americans were the “primary victims of the riots.”<sup>10</sup> The Secretary of the Interior, Steward L. Udall, underscored the point in September of that year. “The plain truth is” that riots had the effect of “stiffening opposition to pending civil rights legislation and hardening resistance to President Johnson’s programs to improve the life in the cities, to eradicate poverty and injustice, and to enrich the educational opportunities for the young people of America.”<sup>11</sup> Putting aside the question of the extent to which the War on Poverty aimed to end poverty and justice or substantively improve life in urban America, Udall was undoubtedly correct in highlighting the backlash effect in the political realm.

Whatever one might have thought of the “insurrections,” “rebellions,” “uprisings,” or “riots” at the time or one may think of them now, it is clear that urban unrest in the 1960s profoundly shaped American politics at the grassroots and the national level. In this “Up for Debate” roundtable, we invite our respondents to reflect on the unrest from the vantage point of half a century and to address its origins, meanings, and legacy for civil rights and American politics. ■

## References

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8. Nicodemus, “Adding Riot Curb Opposed.”

9. *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 10–11.

10. Handler, “Detroit Riots Reported Curbed”; “Negro Leadership against Violence,” Buffalo, NY, *Courier Express*, July 28, 1967.

11. “Udall Says Riots Hurt Legislation,” Binghamton, NY, *Sunday Press*, September 24, 1967.

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