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1967 DETROIT RIOT

Chris Bertolini

Winner of the Glenn Feldman Memorial Writing Award

The Detroit Police Department's discriminatory practices towards black Detroiters and the city's white liberal power structure's failure to provide equal opportunities and decent standards of living to many of its black residents caused the Detroit Riot of 1967. To many black Detroiters, police discrimination acted not only as yet another impediment to their attempts to live as freely as their white counterparts but as the physical representation of those impediments. Indeed, the uniformed policeman's ubiquity in Detroit's black neighborhoods in the years before the riot made the police the primary symbol of discrimination to black residents.¹ Those that rebelled did so primarily as an act of defiance towards the city's police department. The city government's failures to properly address systemic inequality provided the conditions under which some black Detroiters rioted, but the riot itself would not have occurred without widespread police discrimination.

In the early morning of July 23, 1967, the Detroit Police Department raided the United Community and Civic League, a "blind pig"—or illegal bar—in Detroit's majority-black 12th Street district. Officers encountered an all-black crowd celebrating the safe return of friends who served in the United States war effort in Vietnam; the police shut down the party and evacuated all 82 attendees. Black residents who lived near the blind pig began to pour outside, trying to figure out why the police had raided a welcome-home party. While the police figured out what to do with the evacuated party guests, onlookers, by this point accustomed to inexplicable police activities in their neighborhood, suspected the police had brutalized the occupants of the blind pig. Although untrue, these rumors spread quickly, and the crowd grew agitated.

“Forty-three people died during the riot; civilians killed six of them. Thirty-one civilians died at the hands of policemen, National Guardsmen, or federal troops.”³

About an hour after the police had first entered the United Community and Civic League, someone threw an empty bottle through a police cruiser's rear window. The riot had begun, but the looting, burning, and killing that made the riot famous would not reach full force until the afternoon.²

Civilians, however, only committed a small number of the riot's most violent crimes. Forty-three people died during the riot; civilians killed six of them. Thirty-one civilians died at the hands of policemen, National Guardsmen, or federal troops (and the seven "accidental" deaths include three victims shot by law enforcement by mistake).³ The police played a more violent role in the riot than the rioters. The police's role during the riot, however, only makes sense when placed in the context of Detroit's postwar reform efforts—police or otherwise—and the department's relationship with black residents before the riot.

Detroit 1945-1967: "The Model City"

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Detroit thrived. The nation's all-out-industrialization during the war brought jobs and money back to Detroit after the Great Depression

sucked the vitality out of the city's automobile industry. The Big Three companies of automobile production—General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler—supplied many of the nation's military vehicles; after the war, they redirected their focus to the booming personal car sector.⁴

The explosion of jobs in the automobile industry attracted many rural and Southern migrants whose hometowns did not reap the benefits of wartime industrialization. Detroit's population peaked in the years following the Second World War at over 1.8 million. It became the fifth biggest city in the United States by 1950, with only New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia surpassing it in population.⁵

Black workers comprised a large number of the city's industrial immigrants during the war. The black population of Detroit had steadily increased since the early twentieth century when black people from the rural south headed to urban, often northern environments. By 1950, black Detroiters made up sixteen percent of the city's huge population, a ratio that quickly rose as white Detroiters flocked to the suburbs between the end of the war and the riot.⁶

From the perspective of white outsiders, and many white Detroiters as well, the city's white liberal power structure, which generally dominated city politics between the end of the war and the beginning of the riot, presided over a city with uncannily peaceful relations between black and white citizens. However, tensions lurked below the calm façade that white Detroiters either could not understand or met with willful ignorance. The city's postwar successes often acted to the detriment of its black residents. Black Detroiters, many of which had come to Detroit because of the explosion of jobs in the automobile industry, often found themselves shut out of the factory floor by the discriminatory practices of automobile manufacturers and the United Auto Workers (UAW). During and after the war, the UAW shifted its focus

from progressive politics to guaranteeing higher wages for its members. Automobile manufacturers no longer had to make concessions to progressivism to prevent strikes. As a result, automobile manufacturers had no reason to guarantee black workers equal access to jobs, promotion, seniority, or even pay.⁷

Freed from the necessity to make token gestures towards social justice, many of Detroit's industrial firms followed white Detroiters into the suburbs. Most black Detroiters could not work at these relocated firms; homeowners associations and discriminatory loaning practices prevented black people from buying houses in the suburbs. Nor could they easily commute. Affordable public transportation did not extend beyond Detroit's city limits, and black residents owned cars at a significantly lower rate than their white counterparts. While white Detroiters fled to the suburbs, black Detroiters stayed tethered to the city, usually in all-black or majority-black neighborhoods.⁸ By 1960, the black proportion of Detroit's population had almost doubled to twenty-nine percent. Just five years later, that proportion sat at an estimated thirty-four percent.⁹

Black Detroiters suffered the consequences of white Detroiters' flock to the suburbs amidst the national suburbanization trend. The suburbanites took their money, and their jobs, with them. Between 1954 and 1967, black unemployment remained significantly above six percent—unemployment levels characteristic of a recession. Unsurprisingly, black Detroiters did not attain middle class status in large numbers. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders determined that, nationally, more black people made fewer than \$3,000 than made more than \$7,000—the “middle class” amount—in 1966. Two-thirds of the former group, or about twenty percent of all black people, made no economic gains between 1947 and 1966. Most



Henry Maier, Mayor of Milwaukee; Mayor John F. Collins; Jerome Cavanagh, Mayor of Detroit. Mayor John F. Collins records, Collection #0244.001, City of Boston Archives, Boston

of this group languished in crowded, low-quality housing in central cities, so they certainly accounted for more than twenty percent of Detroit's black population.¹⁰

To its credit, Detroit's white liberal power structure, especially the administration of Mayor Jerome Cavanagh (1962-1970), did respond to the plight of the city's black citizens with attempts at progressive reform. The national and local reform efforts, however, emphasized job training, token welfare, and urban renewal. The latter just as often displaced black residents as it did help them, and the other two proved too minor to address black Detroiters' grievances. The national War on Poverty did enable many black Americans to break into the ranks of the middle class, or at least find jobs, but it helped white Americans at a much greater rate. Mayor Cavanagh bought into the War on Poverty's lukewarm reform efforts, using funding from the Model Cities Program to

encourage greater black participation and representation within the city's white liberal power structure.¹¹

Under Cavanagh, Detroit's black population fared much better economically than most of the country's black residents. They had more jobs and made better wages than black residents of most other cities. The city even escaped unscathed from the 1964 wave of riots that swept the nation.¹² But the city's reform efforts did not eliminate racial strife. The national media may have considered Detroit a model city of race relations, but the city's cheerleaders soon realized that their reform efforts had only delayed the expression of black discontent; the city's reforms only calmed the surface. Nothing demonstrates this better than Detroit's efforts at police reform and the department's relationship with the city's black residents.

Black Detroiters and the Detroit Police Department

In the aftermath of the nationwide riots that characterized the "long, hot summer" of 1967, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, recognizing that police misconduct and discrimination played a large role in causing the riots, recommended that police departments across the country implement certain reforms to decrease the likelihood of the riots recurring. The Commission's suggested reforms included integrating police forces, training officers in public relations and racial sensitivity, developing mechanisms to better handle citizens' complaints, and making steps towards equality in police protection (black neighborhoods almost always suffered from higher crime rates than white ones, despite the much greater presence of police officers in black neighborhoods).¹³

The Commission believed these reforms would prevent potential riots in the future. Detroit, however, had already implemented most of the proposed reforms by 1967, and these reforms failed to prevent the riot; Detroit instead

suffered the deadliest and most destructive riot in the nation since the 1860's. The reforms did not do enough to repair the broken relationship between the police department and black Detroiters.

Before the election of Jerome Cavanagh in 1961, the Detroit Police Department acted with violent impunity in its quest to weed out crime. Police officers arrested people they suspected might have committed a crime without having to worry about "probable cause" stipulations or other legal formalities. They preyed primarily on poor and black Detroiters, dragging many of them to stationhouses to undergo interrogation sessions with the goal of securing a confession. Officers commonly used racial slurs when dealing with black citizens, but the city's blacks had to respond respectfully. Misfortune befell the black Detroiters who did not address a police officer as "sir." The city's officers would often subject "disrespectful" black men to alleyway interrogations—beatings—and then charge them with resisting arrest or disorderly conduct. The city government did nothing to stop this, and black Detroiters had no immediate legal power to force them to do so.¹⁴

Black Detroiters could, however, vote, so when Jerome Cavanagh and his police reform platform challenged the previous administration in the 1961 mayoral election, they threw their weight behind Cavanagh's successful campaign. Mayor Cavanagh's administration immediately set out to improve the broken relationship between the city's black residents and the police department.¹⁵ In 1962, police commissioner George Edwards led a massive recruitment drive, seeking to hire more black officers to the force. Edwards' successor, Ray Girardin, furthered these efforts at integration. Girardin integrated the city's Detective Bureau by placing at least one black officer in each precinct. He also drastically increased the number of integrated patrol cars and

staffed several departments with their first black employees. By 1967, the police department's civilian wing had eliminated many of the department's administrative barriers to black Detroiters.¹⁶

Despite the commissioners' efforts, the department's integration project failed. By 1967, only five percent of the police force consisted of black officers. Many black Detroiters simply had no desire to join the department, given its discriminatory history towards the city's black residents. Those who did join often did not stay long. White officers, angry at the civilian administration's insistence on integration, sometimes refused to train black officers, so black officers resigned rather than deal with workplace discrimination.¹⁷

Police discontent with reform extended beyond officers' disdain for workplace integration; white police officers consistently undermined the Cavanagh administration's attempts at police reform. For example, when the Cavanagh administration mandated that officers attend racial sensitivity and public relations training, officers said they found it useless. They held similar opinions of the Citizens Complaint Bureau, a new department through which citizens could report police misbehavior. Detroit's police officers preferred the violent approach to policing of the previous administration and, according to Alex Elkins, "continued to operate by the get-tough logic of the war on crime."¹⁸

Despite the Cavanagh administration's reform efforts, the city's police officers continued to operate much as they had under the previous administration. Black Detroiters suffered as a result of the department's continuity. Officers arrested black citizens at a much higher rate than they arrested white ones. They also patrolled more regularly and in greater numbers in black neighborhoods—including along 12th Street where the riot took place. Police officers essentially became part of the physical landscape of black Detroit

neighborhoods. Their increased presence did not correspond to a decrease in crime. Indeed, some black Detroiters wondered why street and violent crimes occurred so much more frequently in their neighborhoods than in the rest of the city when the police department devoted so many cops to their neighborhoods.¹⁹

Police officers certainly provided some level of protection of life and property to black Detroiters. To some black Detroiters, however, it seemed like officers spent less time protecting them than they did antagonizing them. Detroit's black residents found the common practice of frisking especially demeaning. Police officers could frisk any Detroiters at will, so long as the officer doing the frisking framed it as necessary for crime prevention. Since frisking depended on the discretion of individual police officers, cops frisked black Detroiters—especially young black males—much more frequently than white residents. No police practice humiliated or angered black Detroiters as much as frisking did.²⁰

Black Detroiters had long suffered from police discrimination, but the political and social climate of the 1960s magnified both black discontent and police distrust of black citizens. The Civil Rights Movement took the nation by storm, forcing white Americans to reconsider their relationships to their black compatriots and empowering traditionally oppressed African Americans to act against their oppressors. These developments terrified white power structures, such as the Detroit Police Department. Many police officers came to associate black Detroiters with social upheaval and revolution. In such a climate, police officers viewed racial discrimination as necessary for the preservation of the world they had long known, one in which black Detroiters would remain subservient to the white power structure.²¹

The riots that rocked so many American cities in 1964



Prisoners from the 1967 Detroit riots, housed temporarily in the [old] Washtenaw County Jail. by In Memoriam: Wytan is marked with CC BY-SA 2.0. Creative Commons

further convinced police officers of the need to monitor Detroit's black citizens. Detroit did not experience a riot in 1964, and although local, state, and national officials lauded the city for it, police officers likely recognized that their discriminatory practices would catch up with them eventually. Officers anxiously responded to the riots of 1964 by heavily-handedly trying to prevent a riot within their own city. They ended up catalyzing one instead.²²

The Detroit Police Department and Law Enforcement During the Riot

The relationship between the Detroit Police Department and black Detroiters reached a postwar nadir during the 1967 riot. The city's black residents saw that the Cavanagh administration's reforms had curbed neither economic and housing inequality nor police discrimination. When onlookers began to spread rumors of police brutality after the July 1967 raid of the United Community and Civic League bling pig, the city's black residents naturally believed them. They had long witnessed police brutality and discrimination first-hand. To many black Detroiters, it seemed like the police department

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did not extend its mandate to protect and serve Detroit’s black citizens or their neighborhoods.

Police action during the riot affirmed their attitudes. Detroit police officers and National Guardsmen arrested about 7,200 people during the six-day riot, with 3,000 of these arrests occurring on the riot’s second day. Although white Detroiters also looted stores once the riot broke out²³, law enforcement officials disproportionately arrested black men.²⁴ In their desperately violent attempts to quell rioting, police officers subjected those they arrested to impromptu “alley courts” in which officers would beat suspects until they confessed to participating in the rioting and looting. Those who made

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it to the stationhouse before undergoing interrogation often did not fare much better; at the Tenth Precinct station, police did not allow suspects to use the station’s telephones. Many victims later accused officers at the Tenth Precinct station of police brutality and sexual assault.²⁵

Law enforcement officials killed thirty-four Detroiters during the riot. They performed most of these killings after the most destructive periods of the riot had ended. Official violence increased as civilian violence waned, which, according to Albert Bergesen, indicates “an increasing lack of organizational or normative control over the actions of officials.” Bergesen draws attention to “personal attacks” by law enforcement officials on black Detroiters to illustrate his point: in these “personal attacks,” officials murdered black men for no apparent reason; they had committed no crimes and they posed no threat to officials.²⁶

These personal attacks included the three men killed by police officers at Algiers Motel. Following the murders, officials threatened witnesses with death if they refused to immediately return home. The same witnesses encountered National Guardsmen while fleeing, who greeted them with racial slurs and blamed black Detroiters for retaliatory police violence when witnesses tried to explain what happened at Algiers Motel. When family members inquired into their relatives’ murders, police officers refused to speak with them, instead threatening to kill them if they went to the precinct’s stationhouse.²⁷

Conclusion

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, in its retrospective assessment of the nation’s riots in the summer of 1967, laid the blame for the riots firmly on white America. Private citizens, institutions, and governmental bodies at every level had created “two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” African Americans in urban

centers could not better their situations under the auspices of the contemporary institutions, no matter how liberal their intentions.²⁸

The Commission recognized that those black Detroiters that rioted in July 1967 did so as an expression of rage and frustration towards the city's police department and white liberal power structure. Police officers demonstrated that institutionalized discrimination against black Detroiters permeated the Detroit Police Department by their actions

ENDNOTES

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6 *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 236-250.

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9 *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 248.

10 Ibid, 251-266.

11 Alex Elkins, "Liberals and 'Get-Tough' Policing in Postwar Detroit." In *Detroit 1967: Origins, Impacts, Legacies*, ed. Joel Stone, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), <https://bit.ly/3N5zeCv>

12 Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration*,

during the riot. They vindicated black Detroiters' lack of faith in the white liberal power structure's ability to correct racial inequality through the city's reform efforts. By responding to black Detroiters' frustration with the white liberal power structure with violence—more violence than the rioters had initially used—officers reinforced many black Detroiters' belief that police officers symbolized and embodied racial discrimination in the city.

Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1989), 32.

13 *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 299-307.

14 Elkins, "Liberals and 'Get-Tough' Policing," *Detroit 1967*.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid, 106-111.

17 Ibid, 106-108.

18 Elkins, "Liberals and 'Get-Tough' Policing," *Detroit 1967*.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Burns, 4-6.

22 Hubert G. Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), accessed April 5, 2021, bit.ly/3ybBt2z

23 Locke, *The Detroit Riot of 1967*.

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25 *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 104-105.

26 Bergesen, 273.

27 John Hersey, *The Algiers Motel Incident*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1968), 7-10.

28 *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 1-2.