Kerner Plus 40 Report

An assessment of the nation's response to the report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder

Editors
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$45 million in property damage

43 people dead

Detroit 1967

Mid-summer explosion in 'Motor City' shook nation out of denial

By Shannon Shelton

DETROIT - Carl Taylor remembers being 17 and enthralled by the hot and sunny Sunday morning that greeted him as he and his mother left church in their northwest Detroit neighborhood on July 23, 1967.

The weather was unseasonably warm, even for mid-July, and Taylor recalls it as an unusually beautiful day. What marred that scene, however, was smoke. It darkened the clear sky, and its smell was unmistakable.

"It was one of those landmark times in my life," says Taylor, now 57.

Just a mile from the church where he and his mother, Mae, stood, one of the deadliest riots in American history was unfolding. More than 3,000 black residents gathered on 12th Street near Clairmount Avenue, bent on burning and destroying anything in sight.

Earlier that morning, police raided an illegal after-hours club – known as a "blind pig" – and arrest more than 80 patrons. As police took them away a crowd of angry onlookers began confronting the officers that remained behind.

What happened next remains unclear. Some reports say that a bottle was thrown at a squad car. Other accounts say that someone threw an object at a store window.

However it started, some small acts of rebellion powered a wave of destruction that continued for nearly a week. It went down in history as one of the most destructive uprisings of the era, costing 43 people their lives and leaving up to $45 million in property damage in its wake.

The riot also served as a wake-up call that spurred the federal government to address the nation's growing racial inequality. President Lyndon Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which is now better known as the Kerner Commission, just days after the uprising ended.

Taylor says that at the time, he and other residents in his lower-middle class black neighborhood were surprised at the intensity of the riot.

"We certainly understood injustice, but the individuals who had jobs in the plants, the hospitals or worked for the city believed we were moving forward and following Dr. King's dream," Taylor says.

"No one advocated for the lower classes, and their

▲ Police officer looks for snipers/Associated Press photo

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frustrations just overflowed," he says.

Taylor and his neighbors weren't the only ones stunned by the rebellion.

Despite the fact that riots had ravaged Watts and Philadelphia a few years earlier, and Newark in the same month, many believed that Detroit was immune to such an uprising.

National leaders in the 1960s hailed Detroit as a model city where blacks and whites worked, lived and thrived together, thanks to a vibrant automobile industry. Forty percent of black Detroit residents owned homes, the highest black homeownership rate in the country at the time.

Indeed, Detroit faced issues with housing and growing unemployment, but Jerome Cavanagh, the city's young, liberal mayor, had become a local and national symbol of progressive politics and integrated government – attracting federal money to promote economic growth and combat poverty.

If any major American city had the right to utter the phrase "it can't happen here," it was Detroit – or so many residents thought.

"Many working-class and middle-class families didn't understand what was going on," says Taylor, a criminologist and a sociology professor at Michigan State University. "The people that were pent-up in those apartments, the teenage mothers, the poor, they were ready for it. They saw it coming."

Apparently, everyone else had been wearing blinders.

Blacks had long complained about a police force they considered racist and abusive. The abundance of factory jobs that made Detroit so attractive to blacks migrating from the South had evaporated by the summer of 1967. White flight and the destruction of black neighborhoods for freeway construction destroyed an economic base and worsened an already dire housing crisis.

The confluence of these factors turned Detroit into a tinderbox, and a routine police raid on that "blind pig" in the early hours of that fateful Sunday provided the lit match.

THE UNDERBELLY OF THE 'MODEL CITY'

Like many Northern cities, Detroit became a haven for blacks fleeing racism and poverty in the South during the Great Migration that began in 1916 and continued until roughly 1970. Blacks who moved to Detroit during the earliest waves of this migration told family members and neighbors back home that jobs in Detroit's auto factories were bountiful, and the need for more workers was endless.

In the 1940s, Detroit was one of the most prosperous and fastest-growing cities in the United States, and its manufacturing plants fueled national production during World War II, earning it the nickname, "The Arsenal of Democracy."

The black population of Detroit was close to 6,000 in 1910, according to Census records. By 1920, the city's black population had increased to more than 40,000, and rose to 120,000 by 1930.

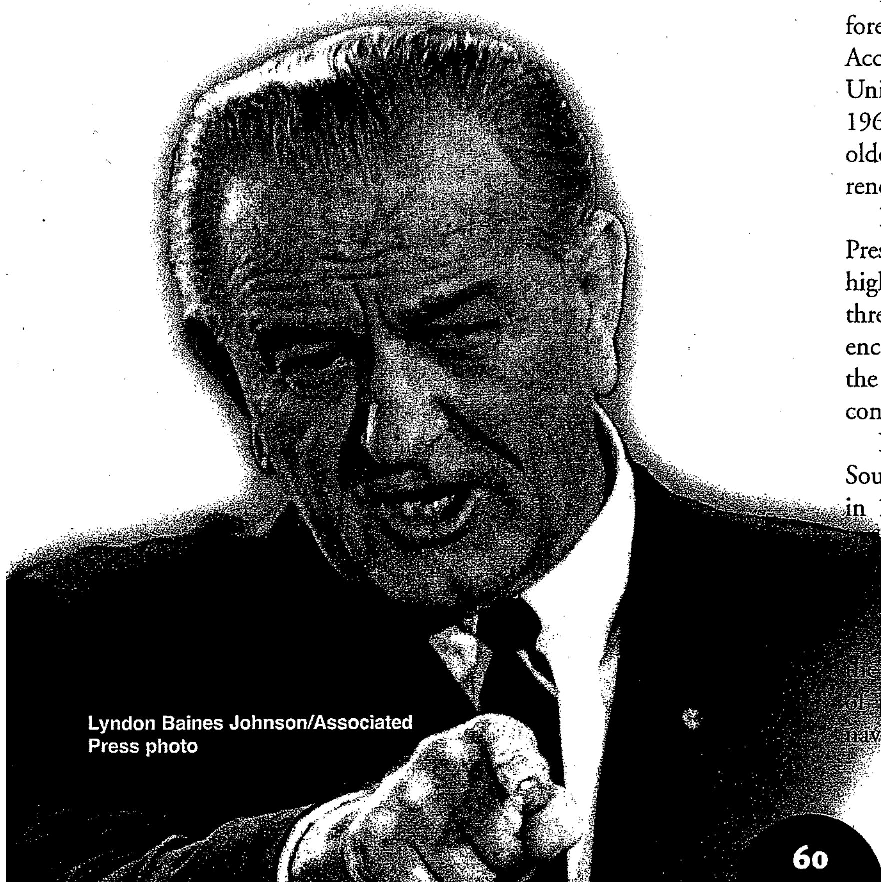
As Detroit's black population increased, housing options for black residents became more limited. Segregated housing policies denied them access to neighborhoods outside of the eastside ghettos known as Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.

Housing issues were at the center of race riots in 1943 that foreshadowed the storm to come more than two decades later. According to Sidney Fine, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Michigan, the city lost 25,927 dwellings between 1960 and 1967, and only 15,494 new units were built. Most of the older units were demolished to build highways and other urban renewal projects.

Detroit led the way in the construction of highways long before President Dwight D. Eisenhower's plan to create an interstate highway system was authorized in 1956. The Davison freeway, a three-mile expressway cutting through midtown Detroit and the enclosed city of Highland Park, became the first urban freeway in the United States when it opened in 1942, creating a more convenient route for workers to get to and from their factory jobs.

Northland, located in the northwestern border suburb of Southfield, became the nation's first shopping mall when it opened in 1954. The John C. Lodge Freeway, another expressway built before the interstates, started as a seven-mile stretch between downtown and northwest Detroit, but eventually expanded to provide direct access to the mall and the office complexes nearby.

The highways provided a direct route for travel in and out of the city, although migration patterns soon made it clear that a lot of people were using them to leave Detroit – and not just to navigate through the city.



Lyndon Baines Johnson/Associated Press photo

Retail centers like Northland fueled the growth of suburban home building, and working-class whites were able to use their factory wages to buy inexpensive homes outside the city.

On Detroit's far northwest side, Warren Armstrong remembers watching from his nearby home on McNichols Road as the Lodge Freeway was being built. A 53-year-old white business owner now living near Lansing, Mich., Armstrong says he and other neighborhood boys would buy food for the construction workers from a nearby hamburger chain.

As a reward, the workers would let Armstrong and his friends drive bulldozers around the construction site, sometimes actually doing some of the demolition work.

"We pushed down people's houses," Armstrong says. "We watched them physically build the freeway."

In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit,* author Thomas Sugrue says 2,222 buildings were displaced during the construction of the seven-mile stretch of the Lodge Freeway. Some were preserved and moved, but most of those saved were owned by whites.

The homes that blacks rented were demolished.

Armstrong wasn't around for long after the Lodge's completion in 1958. By 1964, his father, an Arkansas native, decided it was time to leave Detroit and move his family to the northern suburb of Birmingham, Ala.

"We were a part of the white flight," Armstrong says.

As families like Armstrong's fled to the suburbs, blacks in Detroit found it more difficult to go anywhere. The city's plans for "urban renewal" included the destruction of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom to make way for the new interstate highways. Starting in 1958, construction on I-75, or the Chrysler Freeway, cut straight through Hastings Street, the heart of black Detroit.

Those neighborhoods were hubs of black culture, with establishments that were regularly frequented by celebrities like Joe Louis, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington and Sammy Davis Jr.

By 1960, however, Hastings Street had been reduced to little more than a desolate service drive for I-75.

Businesses vanished and housing stock deteriorated, while the black population continued to increase. By 1960, it was 487,000, representing 29.1 percent of Detroit's 1.67 million total population.

"We were confined," says Qadir Ahmad, a city health inspector in the 1960s who grew up in the nearby Brewster Homes, a housing project.

"There was an unwritten rule that black people had to be obedient," Ahmad says. "Caucasians didn't understand that we just wanted to be exposed to the same resources they had."

Some black families managed to move farther to the north and west, looking to use the money earned from years of factory work to buy their first homes.

The near northwest side became a popular destination in the late 1950s, as blacks were able to purchase homes for lower prices from Jewish owners, often the only group willing to sell to them.

Taylor lived in a neighborhood near 12th Street, a thoroughfare on Detroit's near northwest side that stretched from McNichols to the north and Fort Street downtown. The strip had everything that a resident of 1950s Detroit could desire, from supermarkets with

▲ **Sweeping up after unrest/Associated Press photo**

outdoor produce stands to clothiers, banks and photography studios.

It was a predominately working-class Jewish enclave from the late 1920s and remained that way until the early 1950s, before its racial and economic status transformed almost overnight.

A few black families began to move to the area near 12th Street, and white real estate agents preyed on white owners' fears, warning them of declining property rates and increased crime rates if they remained. The Lodge Freeway also cut through the neighborhood.

One by one, the Jewish families moved, first settling farther northwest within the city limits, including the neighborhood where Armstrong once lived, and by the 1970s, to the suburbs.

As property around 12th Street became less valuable, more blacks moved in. Apartment owners in the area also lowered rents to maintain occupancy rates, bringing in poorer blacks.

By the mid-1950s, the neighborhood was almost predominantly black. In 2001, *The Detroit News* studied demographic changes on one city block, Elmhurst Avenue, between 12th and 14th streets. In 1953, the block was predominantly Jewish, as reflected by the 191 names listed in the city directory from that year. By 1958, the city directory contained 159 names – only 10 of them Jewish.

Black Detroit court Magistrate Sidney Barthwell Jr., who grew up in a nearby neighborhood, recounted the changes he noticed in Alan Govenar's book *Untold Glory: African Americans in Pursuit of Freedom, Opportunity and Achievement.*

"During the time I grew up, the neighborhood was all white," Barthwell says. "When I started elementary school in the early 1950s, there were just two African Americans in my kindergarten class. This was a public school called Roosevelt Elementary School.

"By the time I came out of the sixth grade, I think there were maybe five or six white people in the class of 35. So it was a neighborhood in transition," he says.

Sociology professor Taylor attended all three schools and remembers 12th Street as a thriving business district. Residents, he says, could get almost anything they needed along the strip.

But even then the strip was showing signs that all was not well in Detroit.

In the early 1960s, many of the higher-end merchants had already moved to the north and west, following their former customers, and left behind a grittier business base for the black families that dominated the neighborhood.

Seedy bars and pool halls, liquor stores and storefront churches began to sprout, but enough grocers, dry cleaners and restaurants remained to fulfill residents' basic needs.

In Detroit's poorer black communities, racial tensions and frustrations were reaching a boiling point. The Brewster Homes, a housing project in Black Bottom that originally was made up of two-story row houses and low-rise apartment buildings, became symbols of urban crowding.

The first phase went up in the mid-1930s, and was completed in 1952 with the addition of 14-story high rises. Around 8,000 to 10,000 people lived in the project at the height of its occupancy.

The project was relatively stable in its early days, and for years was one of the only communities to allow black tenants. But by the 1960s, it had become places of despair, as the standards put in place to maintain order – such as requiring one employed parent as a condition of occupancy – had been abandoned.

The market for unskilled labor in the city, which kept generations of Detroiters employed, also was vanishing. Sugrue writes in his book that Detroit lost 134,000 manufacturing jobs between 1947 and 1963, while the population of working men and women increased. Manufacturers began closing factories in the city and moving operations to suburbs; whites living beyond the city limits were the beneficiaries.

Poverty, unemployment, poor housing and general dissatisfaction with the lack of tangible economic gains in the waning days of the civil rights movement had angered blacks around the nation.

And the strategy of a peaceful, nonviolent struggle for change had become less appealing to a new generation of urban blacks – many of them in Detroit.

"I wasn't surprised (by the riot) from a national standpoint," says the 68-year-old Ahmad, who spent time in New York in the mid-1960s working for the Congress of Racial Equality. "Black Power was in the air."

The Kerner Commission's report, released the following year, predicted that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." That statement proved prophetic for Detroit almost immediately.

Taylor, who would later complete field research on youth and urban violence, made a similar assessment. "It's been very powerful for me to become a social researcher and see what caused the riot," he says. "Historically, we have always neglected the poorer element of our society."

THE MATCH

Like the Newark uprisings just days before, the genesis of the Detroit riots followed a similar script. Members of a mostly white police force were accused of unnecessarily rough treatment of some blacks – and other blacks retaliated.

By the morning of Sunday, July 23, 1967, thousands of people filled 12th Street, which was then the heart of a declining, all-black neighborhood. They began by breaking windows, and moved on to burning buildings, looting and firing guns. They smashed the plate- glass windows of nearby businesses and stormed markets, filling shopping carts to the brim with food and anything else that could carry off.

"It was a mixture between hitting the lottery and a free-for-all," Taylor says. "Nothing was left alone."

Some prominent black figures attempted to quell the violence. Star baseball player Willie Horton, of the Detroit Tigers – who grew up in Detroit – and Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., who was first elected to Congress in 1964, were among that group, but they discovered that their pleas fell on deaf ears.

"(Horton) was standing on top of a car, thinking his celebrity would help calm things down," Ahmad says. "He had to run for his life."

Conyers too found himself in danger and escaped quickly.

"You try to talk to these people," Conyers was quoted in *Time* magazine in the Aug. 4, 1967, cover story, "and they'll knock you into the middle of next year."

By Tuesday, July 25, the third day of the riot, federal troops and National Guardsmen patrolled city streets, creating a scene that will forever be etched in the minds of many Detroiters. Police in riot gear roamed majority black neighborhoods, and residents watched in amazement from their homes as tanks rolled down their streets.

The Detroit riot raged for six days, spreading east and north from its origin and encompassing up to 14 square miles, according

to some estimates. By its end on Friday, July 28, 43 people were dead, 1,200 were injured and more than 7,000 had been arrested.

The Kerner Commission's report in 1968 said that the city had suffered between $40 million and $45 million in property damage.

THE AFTERMATH

Artistic renderings of scenes from 12th Street appeared on the cover of the Aug. 4, 1967, issue of *Time*. The article, titled *The Fire This Time*, attempted to explain the genesis of the riot, and how such an uprising could take place in a city considered one of the nation's most progressive.

The worry was that if it could happen in Detroit, it could happen anywhere.

The Detroit riot provided the catalyst for national action, and by the end of the month, President Johnson had created the National Advisory Commission for Civil Disorders, which got its nickname from its chairman, Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner.

The Kerner Commission's report, released the following year, predicted that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." That statement proved prophetic for Detroit almost immediately.

After the 1967 riots, the stream of whites leaving the city became a deluge as they all but abandoned Detroit's interior to move to the far northeast and northwest sides.

Eventually, most left the city entirely.

In 1970, the percentage of blacks in Detroit grew to 45 percent. It climbed to 63 percent in 1980, 76 percent in 1990 and 82 percent in 2000.

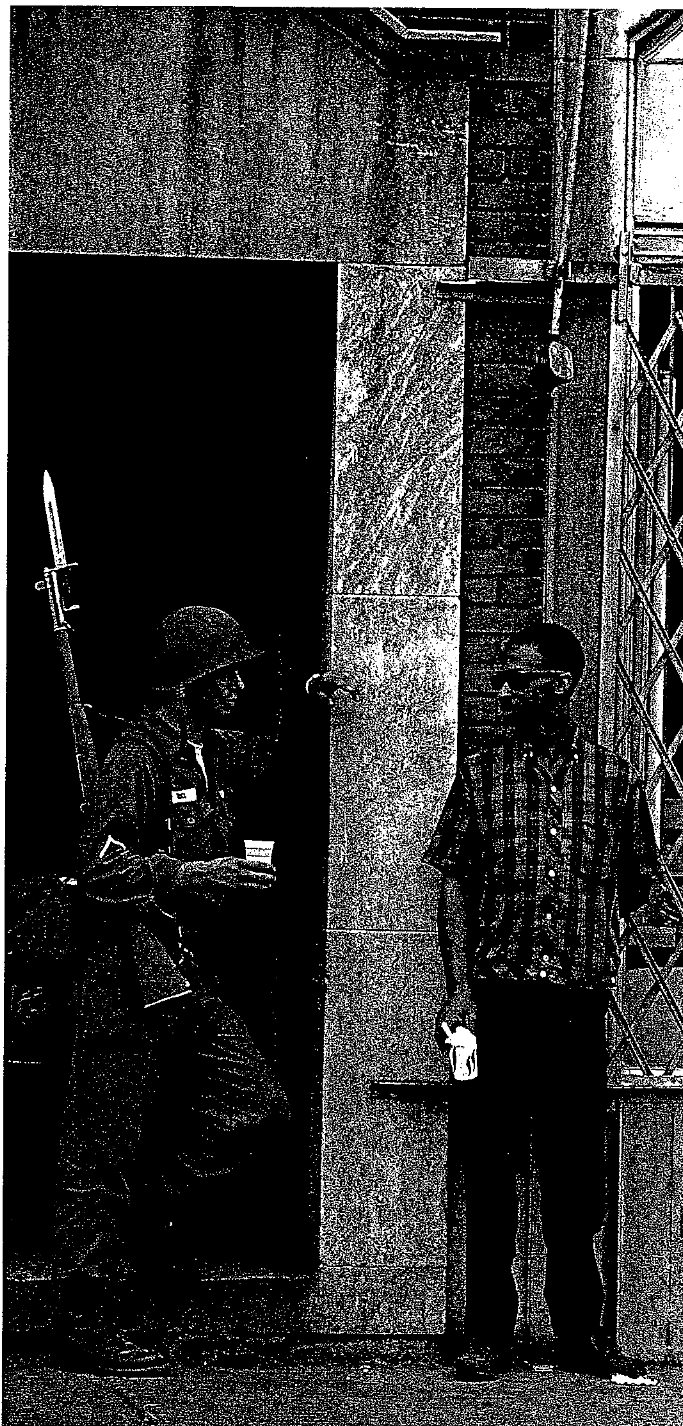
Today, in the areas once known as Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, stand Comerica Park, the baseball stadium that is home to the Detroit Tigers, and Ford Field, which hosted the Super Bowl in 2006 and is the permanent home of the Detroit Lions football team.

Both venues and the surrounding entertainment districts have been hailed as symbols of Detroit's rebirth, and their gleaming structures have provided the city with a sense of pride. For decades, burned-out buildings and vacant lots were the only remnants of Black Bottom, creating an eyesore for visitors to the city's downtown.

Detroit renamed 12th Street "Rosa Parks Boulevard" in the mid-1970s in honor of the civil rights icon, who late in life made her home in the Motor City.

Some new town homes have been built in the city, illustrating another sign of Detroit's rebirth. Yet a lot of decaying buildings still are prevalent – as are the many trash-strewn, overgrown vacant lots that are called "urban prairies."

"I feel like we sat on the cusp of something tremendously powerful – the destruction of Detroit. Everybody lost, white and black," says Armstrong, the Lansing business owner.



▲ **Sharing conversation and coffee/Associated Press photo**

"When anyone asks me if anything positive came from the riots, I say, 'Not in my opinion,' " Taylor says. "We took 12 steps backward. It devastated the black community." ■