

July 1967 Detroit Riots: A Culmination of Economic Frustration

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In the aftermath of the Detroit riots of 1967, thirty-nine were reported dead and more than one thousand injured. In the week following the riot, which started on 23 July, over 1,317 fires raged through the city, most out of control. The damage estimate totaled more than \$250 million, including the looting of 1,700 stores. Two thousand police officers on duty, with 6,800 National Guardsmen and 3,800 US Army troops assisting, made 3,400 arrests.¹ What motivated the rioters? Would a "race riot" be the correct label for the violence? Urban and sociological studies tend to place great emphasis on race as a motivating factor for the rioters.² On the other hand, a plethora of historical evidence shows a greater emphasis on the economic factors that played a role in the riots. The Detroit riots were fueled by economic differences between not only black and white Detroiters, but by the economic gains some black Detroiters had made supposedly at the expense of poor blacks.

In the week following the riot, a Detroit Free Press article presented a survey of the responses of black Detroiters when asked: How much did each of these grievances have to do with the riot? Although police brutality received the highest ranking, lack of jobs, poverty, and anger with local business people were listed as a few of the top six grievances having a great deal to do with the riot. White public officials and hatred of whites did have a great deal to do with the riots according to approximately one third of the 437 blacks sampled, but too much drinking ranked higher than those factors respectively.³ Racism may have been an intrinsic part of the economic factors, but further analysis shows that much of the looting and arson itself was colorblind.

Van Gordon Sauter and Burligh Hines,

journalists who covered civil rights activity in the north and south, note that during the first day of looting certain shops were spared—those marked with signs saying "Soul Brother" or "Black All The Way!" But by the end of day "looters ceased to practice discrimination and stole without regard to the owner's color or creed."⁴ Black homeowners banded together. With hunting rifles and shotguns they defended their homes from gangs of youngsters breaking in and protected firefighters. "The looters were enraged by the armed Negroes. 'We're going to get you rich niggers next,' a looter screamed at a Negro psychiatrist."⁵ Arsonists did not seem to care if their molotov-cocktails burned stores and spread to well maintained black homes. Twenty-two black firefighters were called to Twelfth Street, the origin the riots, but reported being pelted with bottles and bricks.⁶

Who were the rioters? The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reported in 1968 that the typical rioter in the summer of 1967 was a black male aged 15-24, had not graduated from high school, and was frustrated because of lack of training for anything but menial, low-status job. In an attempt to explain further reasoning behind their violence, the commission reported the rioter held hostility toward whites, but equal hostility toward middle-class blacks.⁷

Living only a few blocks from the epicenter of the riots at the time, lifelong Detroitier Peter Buchanan recalls that the riot was not a race riot in his mind, but "was a riot of haves and have-nots."⁸ Rioters made known their hatred of the grocery store by ransacking its shelves, then burning it. According to the Detroit Free Press, forty-seven grocery stores were burned. Furniture was strapped on top of cars and taken home because according to one rioter, they had

been charged outrageous prices for the overpriced junk.⁹

Breaking in and entering, looting, and arson collectively expressed the outrage rioters felt for their economic condition. Most economic factors such as hiring for jobs or renting apartments in slums were related to racism and discrimination the young black men faced. But during the actual rioting, economics played a greater role than racism, resulting in the destruction of property, belonging to both blacks

and whites. Sauter and Hines called much of the looting and freedom to take things unattainable, "a source of sheer spiritual ecstasy, sometimes coupled with revenge."¹⁰ Whether a riot over economics or race, one distraught Vietnam soldier felt it did not make sense, considering blacks and whites were fighting side by side half a world away.¹¹ A riot full of animosities toward the haves by the have-nots: economic frustration only begins to explain the unexplainable.

Endnotes

¹ Detroit Riots, Facts on File, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit.

² Richard A. Chikota and Michael C. Moran, eds., *Riot in the Cities* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970). The eds. present "An Analytical Symposium on the Causes and Effects" of the riots. Relevant analysis includes *Detroit 1967: Racial Violence or Class Warfare*, p. 151.

³ *Detroit Free Press*, 6 August 1967.

⁴ Van Gordon Sauter and Burleigh Hines, *Nightmare in Detroit: a Rebellion and its Victims* (Chicago: Regency, 1968), 13. *Nightmare* describes the lives of the forty-three victims whose lives were taken during the riot. They also chronicle the events and motivation of the rioters starting 27 July.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21. The word choice used to describe the black Detroiters obviously dates itself with the use of "Negroes."

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, at 2-50 to 2-52. Noted in *Riot in the Cities*.

⁸ Peter Buchanan, interviewed by author, 9 January 2001, Detroit.

⁹ Sauter, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

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