

# 'Give Blacks A Piece Of The Action'

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materials the most avoided them with greater vigor. They did not wish to discover that they had probably spent their lives as proponents of racism. Habit had become tradition.

Some of the otherwise "nicest" people saw absolutely nothing wrong with making derogatory remarks, racial slurs, bombing churches, lynchings and the like. Their feelings of superiority extended to such basic things as their expectation of being formally addressed as Mr., Mrs. or Miss. Simultaneously, they would refer to Blacks, including their elders, on a first name basis or as "boy," "gal," "uncle" or "aunty." Those with extreme feelings of inadequacies, simply used the magic word — "nigger." They were convinced that if they lowered the self-esteem of Blacks far enough, their own self concept would, somehow, be heightened.

Of the nearly 200 riots referred to earlier, most of them were quite similar: 1. Most of the participants were Black. 2. They occurred in predominantly Black neighborhoods. 3. They involved burnings, lootings, shootings. 4. More than 80 percent of those arrested were Blacks. 5. Most of those slain were Black. 6. Most of the losses suffered were by Blacks.

The conditions for riot were present in all instances. Those included such things as unemployment, poor housing, police harrassment, low incomes, inadequate schools and a basic exclusion from Constitutional guarantees. In most instances, ordinarily trivial occurrences triggered the riots. In Nashville it was the arrest

of a drunken Black soldier. In Chicago, it was the arrest of teenagers "cooling off" in front of an open hydrant. In Detroit, it was the arrest of Blacks who were frequenting an "after hours" club. In Newark, it was the arrest of a cab driver. In Cincinnati, it was the arrest of a man seeking to raise funds for the defense of an arrested cousin. In Atlanta, it was the arrest of a man who wanted to enter the Flamingo Grill with an open can of beer. In Las Vegas, it was the arrest of a taxi driver.

In every case, large groups of people congregated at the scene. A comparison of grievances, recollections of past problems, a climate of frustration, disenchantment and alienation prevailed. Those on the scene were, seemingly, at a loss for an explanation of how such trivial, everyday events could erupt into such a calamitous situation. Regrettably, they were only cognizant of the lone, isolated event. They could not fathom that the triggering event was merely the proverbial straw which broke the "camel's back."

Mayor Oran Gragson stated that "In any condition of confrontation such as we have had here that is perpetuated without cause or justification, it is difficult to know what a solution might be." The causes of the disturbance were obvious. They were identical to those found in other urban areas. Just six months earlier Whitney Young, President of the Urban League, had exhorted local authorities to

"give Blacks a piece of the action." He was not referring to "points" in any of the hotel operations. His concern was that Blacks were not being given equal chan-

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ces at earning a decent living. Local Blacks had complained for years but no one listened.

Ray Leydecker, who wrote a series of articles for the Las Vegas Sun, pinpointed some of the basic causes in a article dated October 10, 1969. He wrote that "Police brutality, unfulfilled promises, lack of job opportunities..." were among the culprits. Archie Moore, former Heavyweight Champion said that he had "never heard a black man, whether so-called revolutionist or a militant ask for more than an equal share." He went further and said that "you are not giving a man any great thing when you give him a job. He has to pay taxes when the tax time comes." The racial atmosphere of Las Vegas during the first week of October, 1969 was volatile. The participants, to a large degree, had grievances similar to those which the Founding Fathers had had.

Shortly after 8 p.m. on October 5, 1969, a taxi was stopped by the police, at the intersection of Owens and "H" Streets. It was a routine stop. All of the par-

ticipants were Black. Under ordinary circumstances it would not have been a "big deal." Those were not ordinary times. The year had been filled with racial tensions.

Two issues which made local headlines had to do with (1) school integration and (2) welfare. There were also several others.

Las Vegas had been ordered to integrate its schools by the courts. The order had not been well received. Efforts were made to maximize compliance with a minimum of efforts. The solution arrived at would require cross busing. For the duration of the public school system the Black child would be required to ride a bus 95 percent of the time while white students would need do the same approximately 5 percent of the time.

The benefits extended welfare recipients had been reduced. What had previously only been a tight budget for recipients, now became almost no budget at all. There had been protests lodged but they were to no avail.

Unemployment among Blacks in Las Vegas was approaching 23 percent. Among youth it was nearer 35 percent. Those Blacks who were employed worked, in effect, at menial jobs. Front of the Strip were yet not fully accessible to Blacks.

Recreational improvements, which had been

promised the year before, had not been made. Civic improvements, in most other areas of the "westside" were almost not existent.

The occasion of search and seizure was common. Black DUI's were receiving maximum sentences. Misdemeanors and felonies which carried minimum and maximum sentences generally found Blacks receiving maximum time.

Efforts on the part of civic minded groups throughout the state in seeking open housing were fruitless. Some Senators and Assemblymen were casting negative votes on the issue. The place of residence was still being restricted by white society. Later, Blacks would restrict themselves.

With all of those ingredients, the mixing bowl was ready. Observing the stopped taxi, Gerald Wayne Davis asked the suspect why he had been stopped. Davis was a passerby. He was informed not to interfere. There was an exchange of words which accelerated into a confrontation.

As had occurred in other cities, a large group of people congregated at the scene. From there the story is basically the same as it had been for Chicago, Cincinnati or Detroit.

There were firebombs, shootings, rock and bottle throwing and destruction of property. The Las

Vegas "riot" had two casualties — one white and one Black. The former was Carl A. Benson, a Raleigh Products distributor. He was a victim of a robbery which was not directly related to the riot. The other victim was Albert Jim Hayes who was slain while attempting to holdup Weiss Liquor Store.

The District Attorney and the President of the NAACP came close to agreeing on something. George Franklin said that "There were no racial overtones to the disturbances." Charles Keller did not think they were racial although there were some racial overtones. Mayor Gragson shared part of both views. He felt that the disturbances were not racial and pointed out that the officers who had made the initial arrests were both Black.

The riot ran its course. Things began to return to normal — unemployment, lack of recreation, little access, no open housing, sub-standard housing, inadequate wages, cut-backs in welfare and other goodies. William Deutsch, Chairman of the Southern Nevada Human Relations Commission, described the aftermath as a time in which "It is going to take effort by a lot of people to turn the community around and make it a better city for all its citizens." He was right. Not many listened.

Things did return to normal but only after roadblocks had been placed at three strategic locations which closed off the "westside." There had been a curfew, destruction and loss of life. After the usual round of discussions, everyone went back to what they had previously been doing. Perhaps the one ingredient which makes the Las Vegas "riot" of 1969 different from others is that there were no lives lost as a direct result of it. No policemen were killed by rioters and no rioters were slain by policemen.

It did not end on the "westside." It carried over into the schools.

(Continued Next Week)

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