

# The Fire This Time



**T**HIS TIME THE WHOLE WORLD SAW IT: 77 seconds of brutality, as four white LA cops clubbed and kicked a Black man, Rodney King. An everyday occurrence, but *this time* caught on videotape, and there seemed to be a chance that police, rarely called to account for their violent racism, might be punished.

Now the world has seen the shocking acquittal of the four cops, a throwback to the Supreme Court's 1857 Dred Scott decision, which declared Black people "so inferior that they have no rights which a white man is bound to respect." This mentality — that everything bad which happens to Black people is either brought on themselves or is the right of white people to inflict on them — led the jury in Simi Valley to conclude that "Rodney King was not being abused. Rodney King was directing the action."

To LA's Black community, the verdict came like a kick in the head. Within hours, Black and Latino rage against white supremacy — decades of police violence, racism in housing, education, jobs, and health care — exploded.

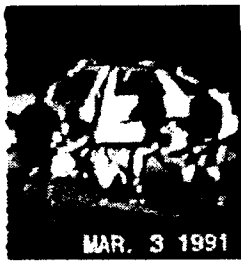
The media and the government keep referring to it as a "riot," the same terminology used to describe the Watts, Detroit, and

other urban uprisings of the 60s. But if the events in LA had been in Africa, Asia, Latin America or even a Soviet republic, everyone would recognize what happened as an insurrection. In fact, it was the largest rebellion in the U.S. in this century.

It was the Black rebellion that white Americans half expect and deeply fear. That's why, 3,000 miles from Los Angeles, Manhattan department stores and offices closed down, shoppers and workers fled, *in fear* of Black rioting — while no looting or fires were reported in any New York neighborhoods.

So, while many saw the racism of the King verdict and understood why Black and Latino people in LA rebelled, most whites gratefully accepted the protection of the National Guard and supported the curfew. Racism and militarism are easy reflexes in American society. Remember just a year ago how easy it was for Bush and company to dehumanize and demonize Sadaam Hussein and the Iraqi people to justify a genocidal war. But this ability to learn to hate a people in a single week shouldn't be so surprising. After all, America is expert at this sort of thing. They've been doing it to people of color for over 400 years!

Twenty-five years ago, the federal Kerner Commission, ana-



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lyzing the "civil disorders" of the 60s, concluded that the U.S. is "two societies, one black, one white — separate but unequal" and that "white racism" was the underlying cause of the problems of the ghettos. Today the poverty rate in Watts/South Central LA is higher than it was at the time of the 1965 rebellion.

The Reagan-Bush years of greed, individualism and ostentation have produced a society which doesn't care if public schools are disintegrating, which isn't willing to pay for "someone else's" social services. The only thing



society is willing to pay for is to build more prisons. The result? One in four Black men between the ages of 20 and 29 is imprisoned, on parole or probation. For Latinos the number is one in ten. For whites, one in 16. The U.S. incarcerates Black males at a rate four times that of South Africa. Today, any Black man driving or walking becomes subject to police harassment, beating, and jail.

The LA rebellion refutes the comforting illusion that Black people would continue to take this systematic abuse. At the same time, it shatters the myth that race is of declining significance in American life. The protests in LA and around the country also contradict the cynical claim that struggles — for self-determination and between classes — are dead and over with. Just think, what would it have meant if this verdict had been met with little or no response? Instead hundreds of walkouts, demonstrations, marches, rallies, prayer services — as well as attacks on the police and the symbols of their arrogance and power — occurred around the country.

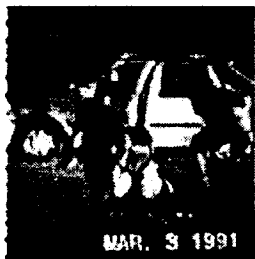
- On April 29 and in following days, college, high school, and even junior high school students all over

the country walked out of school, demonstrated, marched, and blocked traffic on freeways and bridges.

- In the SF Bay Area, a state of emergency was declared and curfew imposed for the two days following the King verdict. Thousands of people were arrested during a week of angry protest, which included shutting down the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges.
- News footage from LA shows whites participating in the rebellion, but support for the Black community from white anti-racists and, in particular, the gay and lesbian community was largely ignored by the media. ACT UP and Queer Nation's held demonstrations against the verdict.
- Black lesbian and gay organizations led a march in Simi Valley.
- In Minneapolis, 6,000 people marched, protesting the verdict, demanding an end to racism.
- In Washington, DC, hundreds of Howard University students blocked the 14th Street Bridge, tying up traffic in the capital's downtown area for hours. At least 14,000 city employees stayed away from work for a day in protest of the verdict.
- Toronto experienced two nights of turmoil by demonstrators, both Black and white, protesting the King verdict and racism by Toronto police.
- A thousand Black students from Atlanta University marched downtown where they were tear-gassed and beaten by police. Over 300 were arrested. A day later, police firing tear gas prevented them from marching.
- In Madison, Wisconsin, 41 police car windshields were smashed in the police station parking lot.
- Church leaders and Black community activists in Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, and the Bay Area have called for a one- to three-day strike from May 15 (the day LAPD Officer Lawrence Powell goes back to court) to May 19 (Malcolm X's birthday).

The post-mortems, analyses and spin doctors all started operating immediately. "What were the causes? What would happen next?" In a move reminiscent of his cynicism around the Kurds, Bush tried to suggest that the real responsibility for the "riots" lay in the poverty programs of the 60s and 70s. His solution: exhorting businesses to invest in burned-out LA. The idea, of course, is close to ridiculous. Businesses which wouldn't invest before are certainly not going to now. Nor is there any real will to invest the massive resources needed for the inner cities. Instead, they're bringing in the Centers for Disease Control to figure out the "epidemiology" of the riot — so they can wipe out the disease.

More than a generation ago, Langston Hughes wrote, "What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it shrivel up and die, like a raisin in the sun?/ Or... does it explode?" The 1992 LA rebellion is a wake-up call, challenging us as white activists to rebuild an anti-racist movement.



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