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Commentary

How riots changed us

Four decades after the race 'uprisings' in Newark and Detroit, it is instructive to compare the way we were then with the way we are now

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Forty years later, residents of Newark, N.J., and Detroit still disagree as to whether the historic July disturbances in their cities should be remembered as "riots" or "rebellions." Let's split the difference, I say. Call them "uprisings." There were more than 100 similar violent disturbances in various cities in 1967. But the most remembered were in Detroit, where 43 people died in late July, and two weeks earlier in Newark, where 26 died.

This was two years after the Watts section of Los Angeles went up in flames and less than a year before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. would ignite dozens more cities.

We remember these disturbances mostly as riots, but that implies something random and irrational. Uprising implies a spontaneous mass action that is more explainable, yet less organized than a rebellion.

The disturbances of the 1960s had distinct causes and effects with which our cities still live. Most were ignited by explosive confrontations with police, but the seeds were set years earlier in urban "ghettos." That was the popular term at the time for the densely populated, economically starved urban communities into which black families were segregated by rampant discrimination in jobs, home mortgages, insurance redlining and other disinvestments.

What's most remarkable to me -- four decades later -- is how few remarks are being made about the upheavals. Even in Newark and Detroit, residents and civic leaders have been divided over how the tragic events should be commemorated or whether they even deserve to be acknowledged.

I attribute this reluctance to an admirable American quality: We are a forward-looking people. Like reluctant alumni at a class reunion, we are nervous about dredging up bad memories.

Besides, there is the lingering fear in many minds that if we talk about riots, they might start up again. In fact, we should try to learn from past mistakes before we make new ones.

No one was more perplexed by the uprisings, historians say, than President Lyndon B. Johnson, who gambled considerable political capital to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He even suspected, with the encouragement of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, that the uprisings were a possible Soviet plot.

He named a commission in 1967, headed by former Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, to find the roots of the uprisings. After hundreds of interviews, the commission blamed reasons closer to home than Russia: Racial discrimination had cut African-Americans out of the United States' social, political and economic mainstream.

With that in mind, it is instructive to compare the way we were then with the way we are now:

Then: The Kerner Commission said we were "two societies," separate, unequal and increasingly angry, fearful, resentful and suspicious of each other.

Now: The economic gap between the rich and the poor in black America is wider than the one between blacks and whites.

Then: We saw "white flight" to the suburbs.

Now: We see black-middle-class flight to suburbs and mostly white "re-gentrification" of revived "hip" inner-city neighborhoods.

Then: Jobs moved to the suburbs.

Now: Jobs are moving overseas.

Then: There were almost no blacks in local governments, except for the janitors.

Now: Dozens of black mayors and lots of immigrant janitors, as many native-born Americans pass over entry-level jobs.

Then: King and Johnson led a "war on poverty."

Now: We see politicians of both parties offering various versions of a new war on poverty.

Then: King competed with the "black power" movement.

Now: Entertainer Bill Cosby's argument for improved black behavior competes with the post-industrialists who blame structural changes in the economy.

In fact, both sides are right. The economy has changed, but too many black Americans have failed or have been unable to take advantage of opportunities that the civil rights movement opened up.

The past teaches us that government can help open up opportunities for the poor to receive jobs, education and training.

But we also need to find ways at the local level to calm the quiet riots of crime and poverty that still keep us awake at night, nervous about the past and fearful of the future.

After all, as Whitney Young, a great black leader of the 1960s put it, we may have come here on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.

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