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THE DAY AFTER

Here, six days after it happened, are the tributaries feeding the explosion in Los Angeles:

1. At almost every official level, the handling of it was maladroit. The governor of California should have been prepared for rabid behavior; so should the mayor of Los Angeles have been prepared; so should the police chief. It did not argue well for coordinated activity between the mayor and the police chief that they have not had a conversation for 13 months. It required the intercession of the National Guard, summoned by President Bush, to put out the fires -- leaving some of Los Angeles, in the description of one reporter, looking like Dresden one day after its destruction in 1945.

2. The remark by Mr. Bush that he would have a difficult time explaining the verdict to his grandchildren suggests an uneasy tribunal into which to introduce us to the due processes of law. Grandchildren really shouldn't be expected to understand the niceties of the law that built up over 500 years toward the system we now use: perhaps not the desideratum, but with manifest advantages over, say, its Napoleonic counterpart, where the defendant is judged to be guilty unless proved innocent.

There is no denying the culture shock. To view that

famous minute of camcorder film is on the order of an introduction to an X-rated S&M tape, the smell of lascivious pleasure being taken by a half-dozen brutish men in crushing one motorist. The presumptions on which bitterness fed were all there: the victim was black, the policemen white, the jurors white.

The purpose of a jury trial, of course, is to present jurors with the opportunity to weigh the presumptions, which begin with the defendant's probable guilt. Officially he is not guilty until proven so. But as Professor Alan Dershowitz has pointed out, his very presence in the defendant's box presumes that there is a very good case against him. And there should be, otherwise thoroughly innocent people would constantly be standing trial. Nobody, it turned out, was prepared to grab the national microphone and say: Twelve men and women listened for seven weeks to testimony and arrived at the conclusion that these policemen did not break the law.

The law is (let us assume) outrageously lenient on overactive policemen, and some effort ought to be made to change the law. But pending such a change, jurors should not be thought dishonorable because they reached an unpopular verdict. Angela Davis was also found not guilty in that general part of California.

3. Inevitably we are asked to consider the implications of the black revolt, mostly fed by young men. What it betrays (no less an authority than President Francois

Mitterrand of France so informed us) is the continued weight of racial pressures against black upward mobility.

This explanation has problems, because a black middle class in America is increasingly conspicuous, and members of it were among the victims of the anarchy in Los Angeles. Moreover, there was another yardstick embarrassingly handy, namely the Korean and Central American entrepreneurs heavily victimized by men designated by Mayor Tom Bradley as "hoodlums and gangsters."

Suddenly there burst forth in Los Angeles the situation with which New Yorkers became familiar during the summer riot: resentment by neighborhood blacks of Korean and Jewish merchants who were climbing the traditional rungs from poverty toward affluence, leaving behind blacks whose self-helping energies are diluted and even extinguished by the hostile forces of illegitimate births, single-parent upbringing, indiscriminate welfare, and poverty.

If there is a state or a federal program that will reduce the rate of illegitimacy, it has yet to be divulged to us. Maybe that is Ross Perot's secret weapon.

Meanwhile, 4) there is the inevitable rush to opportunize on the event. The standard reading of it is that it will have hurt Gov. Bill Clinton. The reasoning here is that the American people were given a hard look, for two or three days, at the metastasizing problem of a disaffected class, and that whenever stability is challenged, the voters tend to cling to establishmentarian authority.

That is persuasive. On the other hand, Mr. Clinton is a Southerner who has had extensive personal experience with racial tensions, the most notable of which happened in his own home state to which President Eisenhower had to send Army troops in 1957 to persuade the locals that blacks also had a right to be educated. Bill Clinton is almost bound to come up with a grand new cosmology on the subject of race relations, in which he will be cast as the supreme authority.

Meanwhile, let us hope a) that Rodney King files a successful lawsuit against the city of Los Angeles; and that b) the destitute merchants file successful lawsuits against the city of Los Angeles.

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