

A RIOT PRIMER



Summer is still a month away, and our cities have already had one minor and one major riot. There is a solution: read the riot act, and act accordingly.

EUGENE H. METHVIN

DO WE have to relearn every couple of decades—at high cost in blood and treasure—the ABCs of riot ignition and suppression?

Two recent outbursts of urban mass violence suggest we may be in for a chain reaction of anti-police rioting like the ones that erupted in Harlem and five other cities in 1964, followed by the bloody “long hot summer” riots in Watts, Newark, Detroit, Washington, and many other cities in 1965–68. Following the vicious Los Angeles police beating of Rodney King on March 3, police attempts to arrest street drunks, a routine occurrence, produced a minor riot in Houston and major violence in Washington, D.C.

In a drug-and-gang-infested neighborhood in Houston, on Saturday night, May 4, a solo policeman came upon a man who appeared intoxicated. The officer told the man he would have to go to jail. The man refused and shoved the officer. “At that time I noticed another man standing behind me with a video camera, filming the whole thing. It was an obvious setup,” said Officer J. R. Deugenio, who wisely beat a retreat. A crowd of some 75 to 100 people gathered, and bottles and rocks rained down on his patrol car before he could escape. He reported hearing four or five shots. Two similar incidents had occurred in the same neighborhood on Saturday, April 20. In each case an officer’s car was

pelted with rocks, sticks, and bottles, and he was forced to yield a prisoner. Houston Police Chief Elizabeth M. Watson ordered her cops not to enter the area, less than a mile west of downtown, without backup.

In Washington, D.C., on Sunday, May 5, a black female police officer attempted to arrest a Hispanic man who was drinking and unruly on a street in the Mount Pleasant area, heavily populated by recent Central American immigrants. The man drew a knife and advanced, the officer reported, whereupon she shot and severely wounded him. The rumor spread that he was dead, shot while handcuffed. A flashfire of violence erupted as hundreds of youths set fire to police cars, smashed windows, and looted. Washington’s new mayor, Sharon Pratt Dixon, at first ordered police to disperse crowds but make no arrests. The second night, running gangs of youths fought a thousand policemen, burning and looting as they spread out. Mayor Dixon then declared a curfew and ordered arrests, whereupon the violence subsided. Police made 230 arrests in three days. City officials said no more than six hundred youths were involved and claimed a great triumph since no one died, in contrast to the 1968 riots, in which 13 people died. But merchants and residents in the area bitterly criticized the initial police inaction.

Mayor Dixon’s no-arrest order precisely replicated the initial blunders of 1968. If other mayors and police chiefs follow her example, the nation will be

in for a “long hot summer” indeed. For the lesson of history is plain: In riot situations, the earlier the police make arrests, and the more arrests they make, the lower will be the toll in life, limb, and property. And the cop on the street will not act decisively unless he feels he has the support of his superiors—principally his chief and mayor.

The social phenomenon is well documented, but the books lie on library shelves, dusted off only once a generation or so by mayoral or presidential commissions. We need only look at Atlanta in 1905; East St. Louis in 1917; Charleston, Chicago, Washington, Boston, and Knoxville in 1919; Harlem in 1935; Detroit in 1943; and Harlem to Watts to Washington and nearly everywhere else in 1964–68.

Moral Holiday

IN A nutshell: Riots begin when some set of social forces temporarily overwhelms or paralyzes the police, who stand by, their highly visible inaction signaling to the small percentage of teenaged embryonic psychopaths and hardened young adults that a moral holiday is under way. This criminal minority spearheads the car-burning, window-smashing, and blood-letting, mobbing such hate targets as blacks, or white merchants, or lone cops. Then the drawing effect brings out the large crowds of older men, and women and children, to share the Roman carnival of looting. Then the major killing begins: slow runners caught in burning buildings and—as

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civic forces mobilize—in police and National Guard gunfire.

The books are on the shelf: let the responsible authorities in city hall and police headquarters check them out.

The time to halt a riot is right at the start, by pinching off the criminal spearhead with precise and overwhelming force. The cops will usually be caught flat-footed (no pun intended) by the initial outbreak. But they need to spring into a pre-arranged mobilization that should always be as ready in every major city as the fire-department or hospital disaster-response program.

While Detroit Burned

IN THE worst urban riots of the 1960s—Watts, Newark, Detroit, and Washington—the police did nothing or next to it for the first several hours. Deaths and property destruction soared. Contrast what happened in Toledo 36 hours after Detroit's outburst.

There, five hundred young men began breaking windows along a six-block stretch. The fourth police cruiser arriving radioed: "Do you want us to observe?" That such a question should even have been asked was damning proof that Americans had let years of extreme court rulings and hysterical "police brutality" propaganda paralyze our last line of defense against criminal anarchy.

Yet in Toledo the answer snapped back steely and clear. Police Chief Tony Bosh happened to be monitoring the radio and he barked: "Arrest every lawbreaker you can—and meet illegal force with legal force!"

Just as quickly, Toledo's mayor requested and Ohio Governor James Rhodes called in five hundred National Guardsmen to stand behind police in reserve, with well-publicized orders to kill if necessary to maintain order. *They were never needed.* Toledo's police arrested 22 people (nine for possessing firebombs) in the first three hours. That was almost *triple* the number Detroit and Newark police arrested in the same period.

Chief Bosh laid out for a Senate committee the criminal records, "some as long as your arm," of the rioters jailed in his city's three-day eruption. Of the 126 adults a startling 105 had



"We've thought up a great new federal program, Mr. President—all we have to do now is find a problem for it to solve!"

prior arrests, averaging six apiece. Every single one of the 22 young adults jailed in the first three hours had criminal records; they averaged only

twenty years old and three prior arrests apiece. The twenty young men jailed on firebomb charges averaged four apiece.

The result of the quick arrest policy: Toledo's trouble hardly earned the name "riot." No one died—not one person, looter, policeman, or innocent bystander. The will that Toledo's civil authorities displayed, like a heavy rain on a kindling forest fire, made the difference between "incident" and "insurrection." They withdrew the one essential ingredient for a major riot: implied official permission for criminals and rowdies to coa-

lesce and rebel.

As Santayana said, those who do not study history are condemned to repeat it. □

REASSESSMENT

WHERE DID THE CIA GO WRONG?

NICHOLAS EBERSTADT

OVER THE past four decades Western publications have recorded the progress of a vast and ongoing struggle. This is the struggle of our scholars and researchers to describe the Soviet economy. The USSR's emergence from World War II as a victor and great power, its early acquisition of nuclear weaponry, and its policy of hostility toward the United States and our allies all lent urgency to an already challenging intellectual task: to understand and explain the workings of an economic system fundamentally different from our own, and moreover masked from easy viewing by an officially enforced secrecy. It is probably safe to say that the U.S. Government's attempt to de-

scribe the Soviet economy has been the largest single project in social-science research ever undertaken. And the bulk of that work has been done by the CIA.

In recent years, nevertheless, the CIA's assessment of the Soviet economy has come increasingly under question. According to the CIA, for example, the Soviet economy is slightly over half as large as the American economy; per-capita consumption in the USSR is at roughly a third of the American level; and aggregate output grew by about two-fifths between 1975 and the late 1980s. To a growing chorus of critics, these estimates are all implausibly high.

A full review of the methods and practices the CIA uses in its Soviet economic estimates is a task far beyond the scope of this brief note. However, three general sorts of problems can be readily identified.

The first sort concerns the use of official Soviet statistics, whose short-

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