Angel City Under Siege: Death Stared

By HOWARD MOREHEAD

As a working cameraman and a veteran of the Air Force, I’ve seen a lot of tragic scenes but, quite honestly, I never expected to see what I’ve seen on the streets of Los Angeles during the past few days.

I saw a city under siege as if in the eye of a wartime battle. I saw acts of heroism by Negroes who did not join in the rule by the mob, I witnessed acts of vandalism by people who would not normally be involved in such actions. I saw men, members of the National Guard, police officers, and average citizens alike, frightened and confused. I saw fire, burning away the fruits of years of hard work. I saw death staring abruptly into my face amidst many occasions from the barrel of riot guns in the hands of nervous law enforcement officers and soldiers.

In short, I saw a city dying.

FROM ABOUT noon on Saturday until way past 3 a.m. Sunday, I lived hours which I’ll never be able to wipe from my mind as long as I live. I spent the time actually photographing men and women looting stores, firing out of control, and miles and miles of the city in a state of chaos.

At one fire location, I saw a man start a blaze and another Negro run in behind him and stamp out the fire, making his own life in a valiant attempt to save the burning property.

In Watts, a young Negro girl, a member of the mob, shouted at me: “You just act like ‘whity’.”

“What do I look like?” was my rejoinder.

For a few minutes, when it looked like the mob might turn on me, I sweated, and sweated heavily. But I had no trouble really from the mob.

The most trouble I received was from the police and National Guard. Early on Saturday, it was quite obvious that the young guardsmen were frightened and did not know what they were doing. Some did not even know how to challenge me or ask me for identification. One young lieutenant, standing right next to me as I photographed a scene, asked me:

“What are you doing?”

With a camera whirring in my hand, it seemed obvious that he was in the excitement of the moment. I became, honestly, more frightened for my welfare because the police and soldiers became much more edgy as time wore on.

I was stopped more often, sometimes three times within a single block, many times in view of those who had just stopped me.

I saw Negro-owned businesses, with crudely lettered signs in their windows, in desperate attempts to keep the looters and the wreckers from damaging their property. Some of the signs spelled “Negro” incorrectly and such elementary words as “business”.

I climbed a tall fire department hook and ladder to get an over-all aerial view of the havoc and damage. At one point, near Vernon and Central, the smoke from a fire became so strong that I almost became overcome.

In many cases, the cooperation I received from the Fire Department and Police was outstanding. At 77th Street Police Station, I was offered a shirt by a police officer: mine was so badly damaged. (I was in jeans, boots, and an old shirt riding in a friend of mine’s truck.) The firemen helped me get shots by taking me up on their rigs and I spent much time answering questions from members of the National Guard who had been shot.

An average-American uses 8.1 ordinary pencils in a calendar year.

Unfortunately, many of them had been misinformed as to the reasons behind the eruption of violence and public discontent. I found generally that the soldiers I talked to had no animosity towards Negroes. They were there because they had been called into duty.

To say that during all of this I was not frightened would not be true. It’s a terrible feeling to see fire, violence, and looting running rampant, particularly when you know that much of the crime which had taken place was not committed by Negroes. I walked very cautiously about all of these. I was deeply imbued in things which our average Caucasian doesn’t understand. This didn’t have to happen.

WITH all the tragedy, there’s a bit of humor:

One looter, while I was photographing an act of vandalism, spotted my camera and cracked:

“Did you get the last night, lady?”

In another store where I was filming actual scenes of looting, a man shouted at me:

“Howard, don’t shoot until I get out of here!”
Why The Rioting?

Basically, we believe all self-respecting Negro citizens here deplore the burning of buildings, the lootings and shootings and its staggering toll in human lives and property damage which besieged our city last weekend ... and also know the need of proper law enforcement to protect all of our citizens ...

But now that the crest of this surging racial riot has passed, it is imperative that we search for the underlying reasons behind this tragic disaster and then seek for ways and means to prevent its recurrence.

The incident and the arrests which triggered the riot last Wednesday night were only incidental. Because the psychological fires of frustration had been smoldering in the minds of thousands of black people and other Negro groups for years and it was going to happen some day, anyhow.

Knowing our community intimately and continued questioning among the masses who know that our newspaper is "in their corner" have revealed these deep-seated motivations behind the flare-up which virtually tore the city asunder:

- Mass unemployment in Watts. (Over 34% of all adults jobless).
- Bitter resentment in minority areas against Policeman Parker and his constantly expressed and apparently unabashed contempt. (Recently he still doesn't realize the referring to us with the words "Negro people" or "Negroes", which represent the trademarks of racial insults utilized by biased Southerners is deeply resented.)
- Inferior housing and substandard conditions in many areas.
- Substandard housing and almost isolated schooling in some sections.
- Negro incomes.
- Dropouts with no skills and no provisions for training.
- Distress of whites (sometimes motivated by the hatred shown them by whites in the deep Dixie towns from whence they come.)
- Rejection and anxiety over the future for themselves and their children.
- Distress over political power plays which are holding up some help from anti-poverty programs.
- Broken and unkept promises by politicians.

The political situation has reverted to the days when Yorty was campaigning for the mayoralty. He then admitted that Police Chief Parker had done a poor job of public relations in the Negro community. Negroes voted for Yorty in wholesale numbers. Shortly after the election, however, Yorty said he was "100%" with Parker.

In all fairness, little progress has been made. But still there is a Negro police captain in the department. And frankly, the image of the police department in the eyes of most of the Negro community is still bad ... Mainly because our masses of law abiding citizens are convinced mostly through personal experiences that while police do not treat them with the same respect and courtesy that is accorded law-abiding citizens in the major white communities.

On the police issue, it is generally conceded that the personal touch is one of the best ways to reflect the philosophy and practices of the man at the top. Thus, if the police officer on the beat does not believe that the Chief has a dedicated, sense of fairness and impartially to Negroes, he would be inclined to treat even law-abiding minority citizens with respect and courtesy.

Reflecting the sentiments of the "man on the street" in Watts were Louis Green and Ralph Reese, who live with these problems every day, at a press conference at the Ambassador "Friday Night"

"We helped elect Yorty ... but now he sends Billy Mills or a pastor. Why doesn't he come to Watts himself to help us with these problems? If the Gov. of Louisiana

Now the nigger people-bla bla bla

Your Urban League

By WESLEY R. BRAZIER

Housing can get to be a pretty complicated business. First, there's the problem of getting decent housing — and on a limited income, that can be like buying a Rolls Royce with a life insurance policy. If you rent, you may have some problems with your landlord; if you are a renter, you may have some difficulties with your tenants. It is a home, or want to, there's always the complicated tasks of financing. And if you want to improve or re-model your home, you can find yourself playing a game for which you don't know all the rules.

Recognizing that, up to now, there had been no central clearinghouse for housing information in the city, the Los Angeles Urban League's Venus Club

Letters to the Editor...

To the Editor:

I am a volunteer worker for the Boy Scouts of America, Green Meadows Dist. I serve as area commissioner, performing service for some 15 scout units in an area that begins with Imperial Hwy. on the north to Rosecrans on the south, and from Figueroa St. on the west to Alameda on the east. I have for three years met with the families in their homes or at their monthly meeting, sharing their problems and helping them get solutions when necessary from the district.

he tried to lead the for from the top down?

What has Yorty done to achieve progress in the War on Poverty?

In a word: the minor groups were a power in selecting Yorty. How has he redeemed his campaign promises?

The Highway Patrol has the most impeccable record of any police in the state. When a Highway Patrolman was attacked by a drunk driver, did our Mo or function like the May of one of the finest r
personnel lower down is inclined to reflect the philosophy and practices of the man at the top. Thus, if the police officer on the beat does not believe that the Chief has a dedicated sense of fairness and impartiality to Negroes, he would not be inclined to treat even law-abiding minority citizens with respect and courtesy.

Reflecting the sentiments of the "man on the street" in Watts were Louis Green and Ralph Reese, who live with these problems every day, at a press conference at the Amusement Park. They had this to say:

"We helped to elect Yorty...but now he sends Billy Mills or a pastor. Why doesn't he come to Watts himself to help us with these problems? If the Gov. of Louisiana can go to a Louisiana city to help with a racial problem, why can't he come to help us?" one asked.

"We want Parker to come-out-to-help us...we want him to come...and remember out at 77th St. Station they are stopping only Negroes...not the white. Why?"

When asked by a reporter why he and other elected leaders shouldn't go out and try to pacify the citizens, Con. "Gus" Hawkins replied that men like Mayor Yorty and Chief Parker who are party responsible for conditions such as these are themselves concerned enough to go out there personally and help with their solutions.

"We can't keep making promises to those citizens out there that we can't fulfill ourselves," Hawkins said.

He was charging the Mayor's with delay in giving the Anti-Poverty program the "green light" and the lack of other action by city officials to aid people in the Watts area.

Another amazing angle of the riot is that Chief Parker said in a recent interview that he has been anticipating such an outbreak for nearly a year, and for that reason he spent $50,000 of the city's money "to protect the policemen." However, at press interviews during that period, he has denied claims of critical racial relations. In our city, and, moreover, on a TV show he failed to advise the public of anything he has done to act during that period to try to prevent the riot and to insure the protection of the citizens.

And the majority reaction from our community that Chief Parker's comments on the radio not only did not offer any solutions to the problem, but his remarks definitely brought about another deterioration of image of the police department already tarnished.

Unfortunately, some white policemen come into minority neighborhoods reflecting a chip on both shoulders by their attitudes. Sensing this, Negroes also put up their psychological defenses and sometimes the spark is ignited. Whites just cannot understand this, because they are a Negro in Watts and are now being the target of this hostility which is reflected by police toward even law-abiding minority citizens.

However, Leonard C. Moffitt of Newport Bench, in a letter to the Times Wednesday should give his fellow-citizens something to really think about the following statement, captioned "Ashamed":

"I am white. But I am ashamed. Ashamed of the self-righteous statements issued by white officials this weekend as they cast blame for Los Angeles' insurrection on everyone except where it belongs: namely on us with our failure to correct the root of the problem. Those who voted last November to keep Negroes in ghettos so that white landlords and renters could profit from Negroes being disadvantaged in the housing market. Who is making a disgraceful political bong-doggie out of the war on poverty programs? Who hires Negroes last and fires them first? Who has for generations treated Negroes with contempt and laughed at sick jokes with them on the butt end? Who else except the whites — we California whites, we enlightened, affluent, civic-minded, "Christian."" "It's easy to blame "criminal elements" or a "hoodlum fringe," or even the Communists, when what is called for is some really deep soul-searching. We whites might really deserve worse than we get.

What is the panacea for all this? Solution is that police and politicians not be a factor in the riots. Mayor Yorty says — and give Gov. Brown's newly appointed commission a chance to ascertain the causes, make recommendations and act quickly to correct them.

Gov. Brown, we are sure, has the complete confidence of minority citizens in our State.

ice for some 130 scouts unlike in an area that begins with Imperial Hwy, on the north to Rosecrans on the south, and from Figueroa St. on the west to Alameda on the east. It is here that almost every 3rd year kids get the families in their homes or at their monthly meeting, sharing their problems and helping them get solutions to problems necessary from the district.

In this area there are a large number of persons in the poverty class, and many have no communication with ministers or other leaders in the community. What they do not have is an agency that will help them get a job. What they do not have is an understanding with the police.

In scouting we are effective because we go into the homes to talk with them and meet the residents, at intervals, if we feel that the scout must give the program off the ground it will help the job situation. If there can be periodic heart-to-heart talks between the people and trained public relations police officials, we may see a change in their attitude towards the whole political and social structure.

RICHARD H. THOMAS
Chairman, Publicity

To the Editor:

In his term of office, what has Yorty tried to do to relieve the enormous overpopulation in Watts and other minority areas? Has he tried to do anything? Or only direct his energies and our funds to reducing our already scanty park area? (Elysian Park?)

What has Yorty done to over-crowd our image of our great police force as a gang of sadistic brutes, which persists in the minds of minority groups? Has he

GEORGE KOLI

The Highway Patrol has the most impeccable record of any police in the State. When a Highway Patrolman is accused, an officer can be promptly excused for fulfilling his duty in arresting drink driver, did our Mayor, or function like the Mayors of one of the largest cities in the world should do? Or will he wait and try to make the Highway Patrol the scapegoat for the results of the Mayor's own ineptitude?

After all, it is obvious that the armed, uncontrolled, hoodlumism is not having any success in the Watts situation, burning, shooting at everyone trying to live the same life as everyone else. The rich will continue to use economic intimidation and the poor will threaten physical violence to keep Negro from the polls.

Voting is a more right — it is a civic duty, one should be made compulsory it is seen in many other countries. If everyone over 18 years of age is required by law to vote, we will have true democracy, in the rule of all the people, the federal government has the power to draft-strike forces, if he certainly has the power to tell all citizens to vote.

PAUL BOHE

To the Editor:

Those who think that the new voting rights bill will result in a million more Negroes and probably the power of the White ethnic privileges in the South. The rich will continue to use economic intimidation and the poor will threaten physical violence to keep Negro from the polls.

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GRACE S. WILLIAMS

Los Angeles Sentinel
Established 1912
Business, Circulation & Editorial Office
1112 E. 43rd St., Los Angeles

THURSDAY, AUGUST 19, 1965
Entered as second-class matter March 4, 1942, at the post office of Los Angeles, California, under Act of March 3, 1879
National Advertising Representative
Associated Publishers, Inc.
310 Madison Ave. "New York 17, N.Y.
NATIONAL EDITORIAL SERVICES
Communications, News, and Information
310 Madison Ave. "New York 17, N.Y.
Marilyn Mail 3-2445
Urban League

By WESLEY R. BRAZIER

neighborhood to do the same. Service, and hope you will
We're proud of this new be too.

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

I am a volunteer worker for the Boy Scouts of America. I am a member of the organization and have attended its meetings and have helped in various ways.

I have been working with the police in our community for several years. I have seen firsthand how the police have been dealing with the problems that we face.

I believe that the police are doing a great job. They are working hard to keep our community safe and to help those who need help.

I have seen the police do many things to help our community. They have helped to keep our community safe and to protect our property.

I believe that the police should continue to do the great job that they are doing. I appreciate the work that they are doing and I am proud to be a member of the organization.

Sincerely,

WESLEY R. BRAZIER

Probing the Reasons

By REV. JAMES E. JONES
Member, L.A. Board of Education

The recent tragic flareup in our City was mainly the product of years of pent-up frustration, harassment and the brutality which has been perpetuated upon Negroes has continued, even during the crisis.

Relating to the Watts situation, for two weeks prior to the incident I had been talking to people in the area whose parents were involved in the preschool adult consultation program...and their concerns during that time were not really about school related problems or parent-school relations...Their conversations were all in the category of complaints. And these complaints depicted the frustrations and the harassed lives to which they have been subjected while living in an air-tight ghetto.

Their complaints were mainly these:

Exorbitant rents. Inadequate housing. Inadequate plumbing, with substantial conditions. And this with no respite from landlords or rental authorities...And men making $75 an hour...when they can find work.

The unemployed and the under-employed reached percentages of 65 and over.

They complained of no hospital facilities in the area...No dental facilities for their children consistent with their needs...One park and few recreational facilities. Inadequate trash pickups, trash-littered streets and abusive language from trash collectors. No legal recourse and little legal advice on simple matters...And no response from elected government officials in correcting conditions.

In the supermarkets there are substandard health conditions...substandard foods are on sale. There are weevils in the flour and meal...and the prices are raised on pay day. Moreover they charge customers at least 1.75 for cashing checks.

The police in the area are continually in the area looking for trouble. The citizens there complained about the police entering their homes without warrants and taking their sons to jail...sometimes in the middle of the night; being stopped as a pedestrian or a driver, and being detained to ascertain whether or not warrants are out...and being searched and embarrassed. They used abusive language from the police which has become an accepted fact.

But when the police are needed for legitimate reasons, the officers never come.

The incident which took place on Tuesday afternoon was apprehended and where a mother was beaten and insulted has taken place a thousand times in that community. But that incident on that hot summer day became "the straw that broke the camel's back."

The business establishments which were looted and burned represented the symbols of depression and exploitation which have taken place in the community.

And all of the complaints cited above have been made over a period of many years.
City Reaction Terrible

On the city level, the reaction to the plight of the blighted, ghetto areas, the unemployment, the disease, the alarming crime and what has caused it, and all the other social ills, has been the most disgusting. Frankly, in many instances, as mentioned here for a number of years, we have had city administrations which have upheld prejudice and discrimination in hiring police in municipal bureaus, failed to heed the advice of social workers and inter-group relations experts, and who have refused to sit down and discuss the increasingly tense racial situation with responsible members of the Negro Community.

Even a greater error which our mayors have made in the past decade is not to listen to the innumerable complaints that there was a rising-breach between the Negro Community and our Police Department as administered by Chief William H. Parker. They have categorically upheld Parker in his objections to a Police Review Board, in requests for a greater community relations program, and in the many complaints about the department's methods of operations in the Negro Community.

I don't agree with KNS Radio's General Manager, Robert Sutton, that the blame for the riots can be placed upon the shoulders of the so-called Negro leaders. Incidentally, I have to add that Mr. Sutton is proving to be one of the most uninformed and impetuous men I have met. I do think that many of these men who are calling themselves leaders have not done a great deal to avoid mass confusion, as the riots have indicated. They have, as I have written often, been leading a small core of the middle class and not really reached down and ever made contact with the people on the streets.

The incident which happened Saturday afternoon to a well-known writer and television personality is a perfect case in point. You can talk about voting rights, better schools, increased cultural advantages and all of the other things a democracy should assure every citizen. But, if the man you're talking to is out of work, his kids are ragged and hungry, he is frustrated and has no horizon to look forward to, then the only thing he's interested in is the present. How can he feed his children, get a job and enjoy a few of the things the rest of us take for granted?

Things have just been allowed to stagnate and stall much too long. There's been much too much talk and too little results. Former Harvard President Robert Lowell said it in our slums. Social workers such as New York's Kenneth Clarke who have warned that this could happen. Many television documentaries have shown the coming of the bloodletting and destruction which have hit Los Angeles. Writers such as myself and others have written it seems for naught for years about the growing volcano which would suddenly erupt without warning.

But, most of us have just sat back and ignored the warnings and have been totally insensitive to what is now a national tragedy and a disgrace. We are all wondering out loud and decriing the violence and the death as we should. We are all now asking "why?" We are all shaking our heads and looking for someone to blame.

"No one can uphold violence, arson and looting. We make no attempt to. But, on the other hand, as terrible as these crimes are, I think that it is just as serious a crime to deny a person the right to work, the right to live where he chooses, the right to enjoy the fruits of a democracy."

In our hypocritical society, we one hand are asking a group of people to adhere to the rules, laws and standards of the society but in reality we are denying them the rights to belong to the society: Can a child, who has never been exposed to a knife, a spoon and a napkin be accused of having bad table manners?