

The Rodney King Beating

The 1980s brought rising unemployment, gang activity, drugs and violent crime to the poorer neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Aggressive efforts to exert control by the Los Angeles Police Department **fostered** a belief among minority communities that its officers were not held liable for abusive police actions.

Early on March 3, 1991, an **intoxicated parolee** named Rodney King led police on a high-speed car chase before stopping in Lakeview Terrace. His subsequent beating, was caught on video by Lakeview resident George Holliday, who forwarded it to local station KTLA. Within days, the **footage** of police repeatedly hitting a Black man with batons was airing on all major networks, drumming up nationwide outrage against the officers involved.

On March 15, LAPD Sergeant Stacey Koon and officers Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind and Theodore Briseno were **indicted** for assault in the King beating, with Koon and Powell also charged with filing false police reports. The African American community endured another blow the following day, when 15-year-old Latasha Harlins was shot and killed by Korean grocer Soon Ja Du over a disputed **shoplifting**.

Shortly afterward, L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley formed the independent Christopher Commission to investigate operations within the LAPD. In July, the commission published a report that detailed repetitive use of excessive force and recommended a new system of accountability.

End of November it was announced the trial for the four officers in the King beating would be moved from Los Angeles County to predominantly white Ventura County. In February 1992, the trial commenced with a 12-member jury that included one Latino, one Asian American and one half-African American.

The L.A. Riots

At about 3:15 p.m. on Wednesday, April 29, the jury released their verdict: All four officers were acquitted of charges in the King case, save for a mistrial on one charge against Powell of excessive force.

The response was immediate, as protesters took to the streets. Hundreds of people gathered at the Los Angeles County Courthouse to protest the verdict. By 5:30 p.m., the unrest had grown violent near the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenues in South L.A., where locals attacked passing motorists and forced overwhelmed LAPD officers to retreat.

A news helicopter captured footage of white truck driver Reginald Denny being pulled from his **rig** and beaten nearly to death, with no signs of police assistance. Minutes later, a Latino driver named Fidel Lopez endured a similar attack.

Violence Spreads Rapidly

In a matter of hours, neighborhoods across South and Central Los Angeles were in flames as rioters **firebombed** thousands of buildings, smashed windows, **looted** stores and attacked the Parker Center police headquarters in downtown L.A. By the end of the day, California Governor Pete Wilson had declared a state of emergency and ordered the activation of reserve National Guard soldiers. The citywide unrest showed little signs of **abating** on April 30, prompting the suspension of rapid transit, mail service, schools and professional sports games. Many businesses closed, leaving residents to wait in long lines for food and gas, while other store owners, like bands of armed Korean merchants, chose to engage the **looters**.

Although some 2,000 National Guardsmen had reached the city by 8:00 that morning, a lack of proper communication and equipment prevented effective deployment until later in the afternoon. May 1, the third day of continued rioting, was marked by the televised appearance of King, who asked for the **mayhem** to stop, quietly pleading, "Can we all get along?"

That evening, President George H.W. Bush also **took to the airwaves** to denounce both the "senseless deaths" of the riots and the police brutality that inspired them, and to announce the dispatch of thousands of federal officers to Los Angeles.

Los Angeles Begins to Recover

By May 2 the disorder had largely **quelled**. An estimated 30,000 people marched at a peaceful rally for Korean merchants, and volunteers began cleaning up the streets. Meanwhile, **arraignments** began for some 6,000 **alleged looters** and **arsonists**. Highway exits reopened and police began recovering stolen merchandise the following day, the only significant trouble coming when National Guardsmen shot a driver who attempted to run them over. On May 4, Mayor Bradley lifted the citywide curfew, and residents attempted to resume day-to-day activities with schools, businesses and rapid transit resuming operations. Federal troops stood down on May 9 and the National Guard soon followed, though some soldiers remained until the end of the month.

Aftermath of the L.A. Riots

The final **tally** for the L.A. riots included 2,000 injuries, 12,000 arrests and 63 deaths attributed to the uprising. Upwards of 3,000 buildings were burned or destroyed and 3,000 businesses were affected as part of the \$1 billion in damages **sustained** by the city, leaving an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 people out of work.

At the conclusion of the riots, elected officials set about putting the city back together through a combination of federal **grants**, collaborations with financial institutions and tax proposals. Governor Wilson and Mayor Bradley **tapped** Major League Baseball Commissioner Peter Ueberroth to lead the "Rebuild L.A." effort, which attracted nearly \$400 million in corporate investments and set in motion a series of grassroots movements to foster job training and community involvement.

LAPD Slowly Reforms

Attention was also focused on the culpability of the city's law enforcement. On May 11, former **FBI** Director William H. Webster was named to head an investigation into the LAPD response during the riots.

In October, the commission issued a report that criticized both the LAPD and City Hall for being unprepared and slow to handle the response to the riots. It issued a list of recommendations, including redeploying desk officers into community patrols and upgrading the city's communications and information systems.

Critics of the LAPD earned some vindication in 1993 when officers Koon and Powell were sentenced to 30 months apiece for violating King's civil rights. In April 1994, King was awarded \$3.8 million in a civil lawsuit against the city.

Although the LAPD demonstrated improvements with community-based programs, it resisted implementing most of the recommendations of the 1991 Christopher Commission. It wasn't until the Rampart Scandal of the late 1990s, which exposed **widespread** corruption within an LAPD anti-gang unit, that serious change was **enacted**.

In 2000, the city of Los Angeles entered a consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice that allowed an independent monitor to **oversee** reforms. After taking over as LAPD chief in 2002, William Bratton was credited with taking steps to **overhaul** and improve the perception of the department. In 2013, Department of Justice **oversight** of the LAPD was fully **lifted**. However, a 2020 report by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights found that thousands of non-traffic infractions issued by police in California were being disproportionately **enforced** on Black and Latino residents.

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Fostered: *favorisé* - intoxicated : *ivre* - parolee : *libéré sous conditionnelle* - footage : *image* - indicted : *inculpé* - shoplifting: *vol à l'étalage*

rig: *cabine sur la plate-forme*

Firebombed: *bombe incendiaire* - looted: *piller* abating: *ici, de calme* - looters : *pillards* - mayhem: *ici chaos*- took the airwaves: *fit une apparition télévisée*

quelled: *réprimé* - *arraignments* : *mises en accusation* - *alleged* : *supposé* - *looters* : *pilleurs* - *arsonists*: *pyromane*

tally: *ici, comptes* - *sustained* : *ici, infligé à* - *grants* : *subventions* - *tapped*: *ici, chargé*

Widespread: *répandu* - *enacted* : *engagé* - *oversee* - *overhaul* - *oversight*: *surveiller, superviser*- *lifted*: *levé*- *enforced*: *ici, à l'encontre*