

OPINION

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Watts: Forty Years After the Riot Flames

Area witness to blind rage and desperation

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON

The young National Guard officer curtly and sternly ordered my high school buddies and me to keep moving down the street. He waved his bayoneted rifle menacingly at us as he barked out his orders. Behind him, a small army of white helmeted LAPD officers and battle fatigued dressed National Guardsman stood tensely with their rifles poised. I kept a wary eye on them as we nervously walked past the three deep barricades that ringed the streets around my house.

My friends and I were on our way home from summer school classes that hot August day 40 years ago. The smoke from burning stores a few blocks away choked our eyes and seared our lungs. In the distance we could hear the crackle of gunfire. The streets were strewn with empty liquor and ciga-

rette cartons that had been hastily discarded by the horde of looters that for nearly four days roamed the streets near my house.



As a resident of the Watts curfew area that fateful summer, I remember not only the fires and the gunfire, but also the blind rage and desperation that drove the rioters as they pillaged stores and shouted, "burn baby burn" (taken from a slogan made popular by a local black DJ). Many considered this a payback for the century of racism and violence against blacks. When Dr. Martin Luther King visited Watts in an effort to stop the violence, young toughs shouted him down.

The orgy of violence and destruction marked the end of an era for the non-violent civil rights struggle. To many poor blacks, non-violent marches and demonstrations seemed a worthless antidote to the cycle of poverty, violence and neglect. In the next few years Detroit, Newark, Washington D.C. and dozens of other cities erupted into violence and destruction. Many

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blacks embraced the call by black militants Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown, the Black Panthers and the Black Muslims for black power, armed confrontation and separatism.

The violence in Watts also made many whites recognize that America's ghettos were powder kegs that could explode at any moment. The suburbs suddenly seemed less safe and secure. White fears forced politicians to scramble to find solutions to the racial crisis. The McCone Commission appointed by Gov. Edmund Brown called for modest police reform and increased spending on jobs and social programs. That established an all too familiar pattern. When cities erupted in racial violence, hand-

wringing city officials would quickly appoint a commission, or blue-ribbon panel, issue a voluminous report on the causes of the riots, cobble together a few job programs, and toss out a few more dollars for social service programs.

To many Americans that sounded like a reward for criminal behavior, and they weren't having any of that. They blamed the violence on liberal permissiveness, and outside agitators and demanded more police, heavy weaponry, and tougher prison sentences. With the exception of the Martin Luther King Hospital, which was the one tangible thing that came out of the riots, the McCone Commission's recommendations were mostly ignored. The few piecemeal, badly

managed poverty programs, slapped together to cool out the ghetto, did little to relieve the misery of the black poor.

When Lyndon Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam, politicians and the public became even more reluctant to spend more on domestic programs. The black poor, lacking competitive skills and training, were shoved even further to the outer economic fringe. Their anger quickly turned to cynicism and despair. Many turned to guns, gangs and drugs to survive.

Civil rights leaders and organizations did not help. They defined the "Black Agenda" in increasingly narrow terms. Affirmative action, economic parity, professional advancement and busing replaced poverty, unemployment, quality education, police abuse and political empowerment as the goals that all African-Americans should fight for. Young, upwardly mobile black business and professionals fled the inner cities in droves. This further drained talent, skills and leadership, and positive role models from poor communities. Economic shrinkage, government budget

cuts, and the elimination of job and social programs dumped more and more blacks into the ranks of the underclass.

This pointed up a phenomenon about race and class in America that has been ignored, downplayed, or denied. There are no longer two Americas, black and white, and seemingly at permanent odds with each other. There are now three Americas, one black, one white, and the other, black and black. In by-gone years, the iron curtain of segregation had blurred, but had not obliterated, the class divisions between the black well-to-do and the black poor. When the Jim Crow signs came down, and the ghetto walls tumbled, more blacks than ever marched into the corporations, onto universities, and into Congress and statehouses. This gave the false, and misleading impression that economic deprivation was a thing of the past for all but a few unlucky blacks. That was a pipedream, and America soon found it out.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is a columnist for BlackNews.com, an author and political analyst.

Gains Made in Struggle for Economic Power

More black businesses is a return to tradition

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Though African-Americans have been the objects of economic exploitation for over 400 years, recent statistics show that we've begun to pull ahead in the pursuit for economic power.

New data from the Census Bureau shows the number of black-owned businesses have grown 45-percent since 1997. In all, there are

1.2 million black-run companies in the U.S.; only Hispanics own more minority businesses.

This boom in black entrepreneurship is a return to tradition. Prior to the legal end of American apartheid, black dressmakers, restaurants, funeral parlors, grocery stores and other businesses drove the black economy.

Research conducted by profes-

sors at the University of Michigan shows that, in 1910, black Americans were more likely to be self-employed than any other racial or ethnic group; the data also reveals that black women were more likely to be entrepreneurs than white women were. Even during slavery, there were black business owners: free men and



Though life as an entrepreneur is not without it's struggles, owning your own is the surest way to develop personal wealth and community pride.

women built homes and schools in the South and ran boarding houses and restaurants in the North.

Since America's inception, blacks have seen business ownership as a way to control their own destinies. As they searched for financial independence and economic power, these entrepreneurs struggled with racism and discriminatory practices, such as those that restricted where black-owned businesses could operate, that hindered their ability to remain suc-

cessful. Once legal segregation ended, black businesses were forced to compete with white-owned companies that had access to capital blacks weren't able to tap into.

While funding for minority businesses has improved and has contributed to the growth in black entrepreneurship, the playing field is far from level. On average, blacks have less access to start-up funds than whites and usually launch their businesses with

fewer reserves. The lack of a "cushion" strains a fledgling venture when problems arise; as such, the failure rate of black businesses is greater than that of white-owned businesses.

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote "The emergency we now face is economic." Nearly 40 years later, this statement still rings true.

Economic power in the form of business ownership is the key to combatting many of the negative forces that are prevalent in the black community. Though life as an entrepreneur is not without it's struggles, owning your own is the surest way to develop personal wealth and community pride. It's what our ancestors envisioned; let's keep moving towards the dream.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

'Operation Tsunami' in Zimbabwe

Government debacle leaves millions homeless

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

now unable to do so.

Nearly three-quarters of a million people in Zimbabwe have been rendered homeless as the government has destroyed their small shanties in a program which the government has named "Operation Restore Order," but which the people are calling Operation Tsunami.

By whatever name, this action by the Zimbabwe government of President Robert Mugabe has been condemned by the United Nations in a recent report, which has also demanded that compensation be paid to the victims.

It is winter in Zimbabwe, which means that thousands of families are left without homes to shiver in tents. In many instances, not only were homes destroyed, but so were the markets and small businesses which support many families. Moreover, the nation is facing a food shortage and oil is not readily available to most Zimbabweans.

Operation Restore Order is the latest in a series of actions taken by the Mugabe administration that are leading much of the world outside Africa to turn its back on this government. Other actions include the re-distribution of much of the country's farmland, which Mr. Mugabe attributed to the need to end the last vestiges of colonialism. But it has meant that much of the farmland which had been able to produce food for the nation is

in much of Africa and often named with Nelson Mandela. His courage and wisdom guided those fighting the apartheid government of Rhodesia and led them into the new nation of Zimbabwe. I remember when many African Americans were buying land and homes in the newly freed Zimbabwe, inspired by Mr.

The bulldozing of tens of thousands of homes of the poorest of the poor is one more testimony to Mr. Mugabe's zealotry and his willingness to do anything to remain in power.

charged that their opposition has meant the harassment, beatings and arrest of their leaders. In addition, many journalists have been imprisoned or forced to leave the country.

The United Nations report, written by Anna Tibaijuka, the highest ranking African woman in the U.N., called these latest actions under Operation Restore Order a "humanitarian crisis of immense proportions" which leaves Zimbabwe in a "virtual state of emergency." Yet, leaders of

African nations seem unable or unwilling to speak out against Mr. Mugabe's actions, calling it an "internal matter."

Perhaps the biggest tragedy of the Zimbabwe debacle is that Robert Mugabe was a much respected liberation movement leader, revered

Mugabe and his beautiful land. Today the economy and the nation of Zimbabwe are in shambles. The bulldozing of tens of thousands of homes of the poorest of the poor is one more testimony to Mr. Mugabe's zealotry and his willingness to do anything to remain in power. It's a sad commentary.

Meanwhile, the people of Zimbabwe wait - wait for the world to intervene in the madness. They are hungry - hungry for food and hungry for justice. Now, many of them are also homeless. Tragically, many are also becoming hopeless. While they wait.

Bernice Powell Jackson is executive minister of Justice and Witness Ministries for the United Church of Christ.

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