

Riot Redux: Events of 2015 Mirrored the Unrest of 1967, 1968

By Zenitha Prince
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For elders within Baltimore's Black community, the recent uprising after the death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray was like a flashback to the riots that erupted in April 1968 after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Both were birthed from tragic events involving the deaths of an African-American man and both represented the underlying rage and frustration present in the African-American community caused by years of not just benign neglect but [also] what appears to be intentional neglect caused by racism," said Bishop Douglas Miles, pastor of Koinonia Baptist Church and co-chairman emeritus of the advocacy group, Baltimoreans United in Leadership (BUILD).

Both riots occurred after months of protest by African-American communities across the nation.

In the summer of 1967, smoke hovered over cities such as Detroit, Newark and Chicago as Black Americans expressed frustration over the lack of social and economic progress.

Baltimore had largely kept its cool until the assassination of Dr. King on the balcony of a Memphis, Tenn., hotel on April 4, 1968 ignited the smoldering anger that had been, until then, contained.

Within two days of King's death, Baltimore had joined the almost 100 cities across the nation where riots had erupted. Driven by frustrations over limited job and housing opportunities, and further fuelled by resentment of merchants who practiced usury and charged higher prices for lower-quality goods, fire bombers struck the first major blow in the Gay Street commercial corridor on the night of April 6.

"The looting and burning swept eastward from Gay St. to Milton Ave., and spread in crazy-quilt patterns across the inner city," reported the AFRO in its April 13, 1968 edition.

Pastors, community activists and political leaders such as Clarence and Parren Mitchell walked the streets trying to calm protestors. And there were unexpected voices, like that of then-notori-

ous drug kingpin Melvin Williams.

"Little Melvin (Williams) had talked to some of the guys to come together," Clarence Mitchell recalled in an April 2008 AFRO article. "The hustlers of the day came from East Baltimore, they came from South Baltimore and they came from West Baltimore and they made appeals to the communities that they came from to stop the riots. The next day the riots had stopped."

After four days of rioting, four people had been killed, 700 injured; there had been more than 600 fires, about 1,000 businesses had been looted or burned and 5,800 people had been arrested, according to an AFRO recounting.

The seeds of disillusionment, hurt and frustration that gave birth to the '68 riots were in many ways responsible for the unrest that bloomed almost 50 years later.

"The same societal ills that beset African Americans in '68 had been heightened over the years because of the lack of federal, state and local funding to correct many of the ills," Bishop Miles said. "And what made it worse is the fact that the employment opportunities present in '68 are virtually nonexistent in 2015, particularly Rust Belt jobs like those at Bethlehem Steel, which at its peak employed about 32,000 people.

"That employment has been replaced by minimum wage, part-time, often seasonal jobs in the service industry," he continued. "And now the largest employer in poor communities in Baltimore is the illegal drug enterprise, which was virtually non-existent in 1968."

The explosion of the drug trade in turn influenced the adoption of an aggressive, "broken windows" policing policy that fostered police mistreatment of African Americans and bred mistrust.

The slaying of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and countless other unarmed Blacks at the hands of police and vigilantes over the past few years triggered protests across the nation. And the death of Freddie Gray, a Sandtown-Winchester resident, while in police custody on April 19, brought matters in Baltimore to a head.

Days of peaceful protest were transformed

April 27, the day of Gray's funeral, when a group of students began to taunt and throw missiles at police officers and their cars near Mondawmin Mall.

Activists and interfaith leaders, particularly the Rev. Jamal Bryant of Empowerment Temple, took to the streets, offering prayers to God and petitions to rioters to stop the destruction. And, as the hustlers did in '68, members of the Crips, Bloods and Black Guerrilla Family gangs also stepped up to try and renew the peace in 2015.

The damage was nowhere near as far-ranging or extensive as left in the wake of the '68 riots.

In fact there are still some burnt-up shells of businesses that were



This photograph shows a soldier standing guard on the corner of 7th & N Street NW in Washington D.C. with the ruins of buildings that were destroyed during the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

burned in 1968, particularly on Gay Street. But the new destruction compounded blight left behind 47 years ago, some leaders said.

"We're still recovering from a situation that occurred 40 years ago and now we have further

destruction on top of it. This just sets us further back."

"There needs to be the same type of strategy development for neighborhoods as was created for the development of downtown, a strategy that must go forward

regardless of who is in the mayor's office or the governor's seat," he said.

"Unless that kind of higher commitment is made, three to five years from now we will be reliving the same type of turmoil that we are witnessing today."

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