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Watts: A Tragedy of Errors*

by

E. J. Josey

Today marks the end of Negro History Week. Since our last celebration of Negro History Week in 1965, the most devastating and destructive race riot ever to strike America transpired last August. Much has been said and written about this catastrophe. I submit that a great deal more will be said and written about this riot, before the end of this decade. Since Watts will be a significant chapter in the history of the Negro, it may very well be fitting that we close the 1966 celebration of Negro History Week by re-examining Watts. Let us consider the subject: "Watts: A Tragedy of Errors."

Watts is a section of Los Angeles. It was once known as Midtown. It is a black ghetto for most of the Los Angeles' 420,000 Negroes. Essentially, it is the Harlem of Los Angeles. All persons of color like ourselves, who do not live in California were dismayed and disheartened, when we first learned of the Watts' riot. But after sober reflection and study, we reached the conclusion that our nation is guilty of serious errors of judgment.

The first tragic error is the fact that President Johnson in his historic Howard University Commencement address last June forewarned the nation about the plight of the Negro's existence in this county.

President Johnson said, "In far too many ways American Negroes have been another nation, deprived of freedom, crippled by hatred, the doors of opportunity closed to hope." Continuing, he said "freedom is the right to share, share fully and equally in American society, to vote, to hold a job, to enter a public place, to go to school. It is the right to be treated in every part of our national life as a person equal in dignity and promise to all others.

"But freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying now you're free to go where you want and do as you desire and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him up to the starting line of a race and then say, you're free to compete with all the others, and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity.

"All of our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates and this is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights."

In spite of the wisdom of the President in assessing the plight of the Negro, most Americans, including those in Los Angeles, went about their business as-usual-way and closed their eyes to Negroes.

*Address delivered at Vespers Savannah State College, February 20, 1966.

They shrugged their shoulders and said those Negroes have won the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, the Economic Opportunity Act, and the Voting Rights Bill. What more do they want? But in the words of Lyndon Johnson, "Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All of our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates."

The second tragic error committed by the well meaning liberal white citizens of Los Angeles was their failure to view the Negro community as being cut off from the mainstream of American life or to borrow the president's label, view the Negro community as "another nation." Not really knowing the Negro community or the "another nation," they did not know how the Negro felt. Oh yes, the Negro in great northern centers, including Watts, had been reminded that he had made terrific progress in the past twelve years, beginning with the Supreme Court Decision of 1954, the Civil Rights Bills in 1957, 1960, 1964, the Voting Rights Bill of 1965, but in spite of these historic pieces of legislation, the Negro did not observe any real substantive changes in his day-to-day life. He continued to live in decayed ghetto housing. He realized that he did not have a real stake in the economic life of the nation, i.e., he does not own any of the means of production; he does not participate in the distribution and sale of goods that he must purchase in order to live. As he looked around in his community, he is made aware of the fact that his children are being educated in inferior schools, and he is still denied certain jobs, notwithstanding that Title VII is now operative in the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. As he examined his community, he discovered that 90% of the Negroes in Los Angeles were huddled together in Watts, a congested area that holds most of the black Americans in Los Angeles in a square of 25 blocks.

The third tragic error may be seen in the police brutality that had been practiced in Watts. Negro citizens were tired of the beastly acts they had to suffer at the hands of the white policemen. Dr. Kenneth B. Clark points out that "to say as Police Chief William Parker did of the Los Angeles Negroes, 'we are on top and they are on the bottom,' is to prove to Negroes that their deep fears and hatred of established law and order are justified." No wonder the California Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights accused the Mayor of Los Angeles, Samuel W. Yorty and Chief of Police, William H. Parker of "gross negligence" of their duties in advance of the riot last August.

The New York Times of January 23, 1966 reports that "for years, police officials and particularly Chief Parker, have turned a deaf ear to the complaints of Negro citizens of Los Angeles . . . Chief Parker has constantly refused to meet with Negro leaders, has challenged their right to represent their community and has disparaged the Civil Rights movement.¹ Thus, you can clearly see that the Los Angeles police department and its chief of police were insensitive to the feelings of Negroes, and their attitudes were those of racists.

¹Kenneth B. Clark, "The Wonder is There Have Been So Few Riots," *New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 1965, p. 10.

One account of police brutality is as follows: "a 22 year old Watts man told a reporter that 'police brutality is like when they arrest you where it cannot be seen and whip on you. Then they grab you when you walk down the street. They pull over and beat on you. That aint right. It don't happen to white people.'"² Hence, it is clearly evident that the police use excessive force, are abusive, and are inhumane in their treatment of the Negro in Watts.

It is easy to comprehend why the arrest of the young Negro man and the striking of his mother set off the violence which lasted for six days with 34 people being killed, 1,032 injured, 3,438 jailed, and \$40 million worth of property lost by burning and wrecking. In the words of one commentator, "Nor have the residents of Watts forgotten that 27 of the dead were Negroes, almost all of the wounded were Negroes—even though the war between the 'disestablished' and the 'establishment' was seen by millions of people around the world as a nightmare of Negroes burning and stealing property as they killed innocent white citizens."

Yes, I deplore the violence which rocked Los Angeles, but I join Senator Robert Kennedy in his observations, after the riot, as reported by Dr. Clark. "There is no point in telling Negroes to observe the law . . . It has almost always been used against [them] . . . All these places—Halem, Watts, Southside—are riots waiting to happen."³ While I deplore the riots and feel that there are suitable alternatives, I must hasten to add that oppressed people who have been humiliated, maltreated, and frustrated for so long, do not look for rational alternatives.

Why would these people destroy \$40 million worth of property? Were they insane? I am incontestably certain that these Negroes were not insane! To answer this question I turn once more to Kenneth Clark who says that "the inmates of the ghetto have no realistic stake in respecting property, because in a basic sense they do not possess it. They are possessed by it. Property is, rather, and instrument, for perpetuation of their own exploitation. Stores in the ghetto — which they rarely own—overcharge for inferior goods. They may obtain the symbols of America's vaunted high standard of living—radios, TV's, washing machines, refrigerators — but usually only through usurious carrying costs, one more symbol of the pattern of material exploitation. They do not respect property because property is almost invariably used to degrade them."⁴

All the available evidence shows that Dr. Clark's thesis regarding the attitude of "no realistic stake in respecting property because in a basic sense they do not possess it is irrefutable, for they destroyed the property that did not belong to them and they destroyed property that was the symbol of the oppressors. On the other hand, Edith P. Bishop, Director of Branch Libraries of the Los Angeles Public Library

²Harry Bernstein, "Watts," *Agenda*, January, 1966, vol, 2 p. 10.

³Kenneth B. Clark, *op, cit*, p. 10.

⁴*Ibid.*

reports in the January 15th issue of *Library Journal* that "when the riot leveled the buildings along the length of South Central Avenue in Los Angeles, the Vernon Branch Library was almost alone on that street to remain intact. Its survival in this devastation is an indirect tribute, perhaps, to the program of community service that started three years ago, when, ironically, the Vernon Branch was to have been closed." My friends, because this branch of the public library had instituted an antipoverty program which reached the people of the Watts community, even in their anger and fury, they identified with this library building as belonging to them and having contributed to their community rather than having stolen from their community as did the stores and businesses that they destroyed and looted during the riot.

There is a startling contrast between the economic conditions of the Negro community and the economic conditions of the white community. This is the fourth tragic error that is found in Watts and all over America.

The New York Times of August 29 reports that "about 30 per cent of those living in the Watts district are unemployed. Many are young men born in Watts; many are unskilled persons who have migrated from the South. An estimated total of 1,000 Southern Negroes reach Watts monthly.

"They quickly find that there are not enough unskilled jobs. The city has a strong Civil Service System and even the minimum standards for laborers are too high for many in Watts.

"The choices then are to return home disillusioned, to settle for anything with the hope of better prospects, or to become permanent members of the Watts unemployment pool. Most stay and add to the congestion." These people are rejected. They are not a part of the economy. Watts has a vast army of unemployed whose numbers are far greater than the proportion of jobless in the white community. These are people who are citizens of the wealthiest and the most affluent nation in the world.

I have drawn for you a picture of poverty and misery. In spite of the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Los Angeles did not have an Anti-Poverty program functioning. This fact is the fifth tragic error.

Why didn't Los Angeles have an anti-poverty program? Well, politics played an ugly role. There was a political dispute that prevented funds from going to Los Angeles, and in the long run, the Negro citizens who were in desperate need of help were denied assistance, and this was a contributing cause of their frustrations.

My discussion so far has been about lamentable factors in terms of poverty, unemployment, undereducation, and deprivation generally existing in Watts, the predominant Negro riot area of about 50 square miles. On the other side of the coin, a Negro middle-class lives in Los Angeles. When the Negro reached middle class status in education, in employment, and in outlook, he moved out of Watts and

left the poor Negroes in the ghetto by themselves. Thus, we come to our sixth tragic error, i.e., middle class Negroes who escape the ghetto and, at the same time, quickly forget their black brothers who continue to live in misery and squalor. The black bourgeoisie has not learned that if one black man is at the bottom of the ladder, all black men are at the bottom of the ladder.

I challenge all of you who will undoubtedly finish college and join that middle-class group, to never forget your black brothers. Some students on this campus who have not even finished college yet, and already they now possess middle-class values; thus, making it impossible for them to even join the College Chapter of the NAACP and making it impossible for them to sign a petition in behalf of Julian Bond. Yet whites belong to the NAACP, and white students at the University of Florida stood at the Georgia-Florida border for one day in behalf of Julian Bond and carried signs which read "You are now entering the American sector."

Returning from my digression, that I make no apologies for—The New York Times reveals that these thousands of Negroes who lived in Watts "felt rejected and isolated, even from the humming middle-class Negro community 'on the other side of the freeway.'"

A tragedy of errors occurred in Los Angeles. It is difficult to rectify tragedy, but several steps have been taken. A presidential task force from Washington quickly moved into Los Angeles. A massive program assisted by federal funds has begun. The governor's commission led by John A. McCone, former head of the Central Intelligence studied the situation and has made its report. The McCone report has been called "a bitter disappointment" by Negro Civil Rights leaders and the California Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

The Advisory Committee, which is chaired by the Right Reverend James A. Pike, Episcopal Bishop of San Francisco, accepted the McCone's Commission's recommendations in education, employment and housing to prevent a recurrence of rioting. The Advisory Committee's recommendation, in my opinion, goes more to the root of the problem, for they suggest the following steps to be taken:

1. Immediate assignment of a Federal official to make decisions on allocations of Federal funds. Among other things, he would establish a crash program to help the unemployed find jobs, including new jobs created with federal funds.
2. Immediate expansion of the Presidential Executive order relating to discriminating in housing.
3. That the new Department of Housing and Urban Development designates Los Angeles as an area for top priority attention.
4. That the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights schedule hearings in Los Angeles at the earliest possible date."⁵

⁵New York Times, January 23, 1966.

Finally, there are hundreds of potential Watts in America. The fires of protest and explosion do not have to be ignited, if communities all over America accept President Johnson's admonition that ". . . it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All of our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates and this is the next and the more profound stage of the battle of Civil Rights."

The urgent problem today is America must muster the courage to abandon racism and avoid a future tragedy of errors.