

JJ-

On March 29, 1968 the anger and dissatisfaction of the Black community in Memphis represented by about two hundred young people burst into the destruction of life and property in a march led by Martin Luther King. More than twenty thousand Memphians were present to protest in the form of a non-violent yet militant march from Clayborn Temple Church, located at 240 Hernando, down Beale to Main street to Poplar where the return to the Church would be by way of Second street. Traffic had been cleared from those streets and about five hundred policemen were stationed in and around the area. At approximately eleven-thirty AM the city had experienced its first large scale race riot. By mid-afternoon Memphis was being patrolled by policemen, state troopers, and National Guardsmen. At the close of the day there were about three hundred people arrested, over one-hundred fifty injured and one dead.

The march was staged primarily in support of the striking sanitation workers. In general the march was to demonstrate the dissatisfaction of the black community with the present "sub-equal" conditions.

Among those present were doctors, ministers, teachers, college professors, laborers, and students. There were some whites also included. Even small children were seen participating in the march.

Before the march was underway, helicopters were circling the area. The presence of camera men and reporters added to the restlessness of the crowd. Many student leaders were busy organizing the marchers and passing out signs. About thirty minutes before the march someone spoke to the crowd through the microphone system of the Church. The speaker urged everyone to get on the street and join the others who had already taken position.

Many just stood or wandered aimlessly on the sidewalks.

The presence of helicopters, cameramen, reporters with speeches given by a group of so called extremist student leaders tended to strengthen the hatred toward Mayor Sobel. If not sooner, when the march started there was a distinct feeling of "togetherness" among all blacks present. The younger people exhibited this feeling by cheering and shouting hostile expressions toward the Mayor.

While at the starting point rumors spread. This contributed to the feeling of dissatisfaction that had now generalized toward the white power structure. A gradual deepening of hostilities occurred during the march from Clayborn Temple to Beale street. When we reached Main street we were ordered to turn back by policemen. A possible and likely reason was because many of the young demonstrators had armed themselves.

with sticks. Upon the breakage of one window a type of chain reaction took place in the form of destruction, thus marking the beginning of a riot.

Looting, destruction of property, and attacks on policemen were simultaneously taking place. Tailoring shops were relieved of much if not all of their merchandise, but youth had acquired seven suits. Package stores were damaged. Liquor was stolen and much of the stock was broken. A policeman who had been separated from his comrades was being chased by angry youths. Yet even in the mass confusion, the spirit of "together ness" was apparent. Blacks from different neighborhoods who had previously been violent toward each other joined destructive forces in a common cause, — "to get white."

During the havoc the sound of rifle fire filled the air. Women, girls, old men, and children were being maced by policemen. After observing the unnecessary use of force, previous non-violent citizens began to talk of arming themselves and returning to fight.

The shift to violence cannot be directed toward only one source but rather many reasons. Revenge is probably the most common "why" to resort to violence. The policemen in Memphis have achieved a reputation for being extremely brutal especially in the black community. The riot gave the policemen's victims a change to "even the score." Also, a disgust with the power structure finds a scapegoat in the policemen, the symbol of authority. Because these two observations are not proven facts in all cases it is not meant to appear so; nevertheless, they are found to be true in many instances. (338)

Violence attempted to illustrate the seriousness of the problem. Non-violent marches just don't have the impact of a violent protest.

Since non-violent protests failed to force the power structure to satisfactorily solve the problem, many members of the black community believe violence to be only an alternative.

"Nothing to Lose"

Many blacks turned to violence for still another reason, that being dissatisfaction of course. Due to a lack of jobs, insufficient wages, poor housing and police brutality just to mention a few of the black community's grievances violence was accepted with the attitude of "nothing to lose." For these people violence is the only way to force the power structure to adhere to their demands.

8-22
55-7
The harm that comes to innocent citizens is regrettable; nevertheless, in the war for total equality many innocent citizens will be killed and injured. On the day of the march the sanitation workers had been peacefully protesting for forty-seven days. No satisfactory solution was in sight. The black community had become tired and angry. Tension was building. A riot was the product.

Although the riot didn't provide an instant solution if any but it is evident that it helped exert a tremendous amount of pressure on the Mayor and the whole power structure of the City.

One might ask how a riot could put pressure on our city officials. During the three day curfew period the sales of beer was discontinued. Even before and during the curfew National Guardsmen were brought to Memphis.

The cost of these troops was between twenty and forty dollars per day per man. Also one must not forget the damage to property, (Business) which was directed toward white establishments. The total cost of the violence was at least estimate (4/1/68) over two million dollars. These observations are almost incomparable when the threat of another or other riots enters into the situation. Compared to Watts and Detroit the Memphis riot was small scaled. Also because of the mayor's refusal to grant a dues check-off and thus the formal recognition of a sanitation workers' union the possibility of another riot is all the more probable. It is easier now for a riot to take place because the "ice has been broken".

Of course riots serve not as a solution in themselves but rather as a tactic just as marching but more "action provoking." Should boycotts and other non-violent protests fail, riots are a forced-choice alternative. This is not to condone violence or to convey that violence is the way of achieving equality but when non-violence fails it is again our only choice or simply remain satisfied with sub-equal citizenship. If non-violent protest prove unsuccessful, as is the present conception of many blacks, young and old, riots will continue to occur.