THE FIRES THIS TIME
Lessons from Los Angeles, 1992

By Halford H. Fairchild, Ph.D.

A man was beaten. His name, Rodney G. King, was immortalized by a grainy videotape that documented law enforcement officers violating their "duty to serve" by repeatedly beating and kicking him long after he was subdued.

A community was beaten. But the second beating occurred in a courtroom in Simi Valley, California, when the police officers who beat Rodney G. King were found "not guilty" by a jury of their peers.

This grotesque miscarriage of justice had grave, yet predictable, repercussions.

The statistics provide a glimpse into the horror of those 72 hours: over 50 deaths, 560 businesses damaged or destroyed, an estimated one billion dollars in damages, thousands arrested. Most heavily affected were grocery, liquor, furniture, and shoe and clothing stores. Just as telling were the strikes against the symbols of corporate America: banks and gas stations were burned to the ground. Now, several months later, it appears likely that a large percentage of these businesses will not be replaced.

Images of a metropolis in flames stunned the nation and the world. If it happened there, can it happen here? Residents of Los Angeles became numb to the fiery inferno, and, like a survivor of the death of a loved one, remain in a deep and prolonged mourning.

Why did it happen?

Thousands, perhaps millions of words have been written in analyzing the burning of Los Angeles, but clear and cogent answers remain elusive. Perhaps the "Why" of the events in Los Angeles cannot be articulated within the context of a single essay or book. Perhaps we need to be a few generations removed from this tragedy before a true understanding is achieved.

Yet, it is essential that we strive for an understanding of the "Why" of the Los Angeles fires. It is only through such an understanding that we can have any hope that the fires of 1992 will not be repeated. Knowing the "Why" will empower us to move forward; as a community, as a city, as a nation.

But this search for understanding has typically resulted in myth making about the causes of the inferno of 1992. So-called experts have offered opinions which, if anything, add more fuel to the fires than illumination of their origins. What are some of these myths?
**Thugs, Hoodlums and Arsonists**

One of the most popular explanations for the urban trauma was that it was committed by a small handful of thugs, hoodlums, and arsonists. According to this theory, it was "criminals and hooligans" who took advantage of an "opportunity" created by mass mayhem.

But this idea denies the societal inequities that give rise to criminality; or how the pressure of discrimination and deprivation may cause otherwise law abiding people to break the law in a mass display of outrage. Too many people were involved for the disturbances to be attributed to a radical fringe. No one is born a criminal. What is it about our social structure that creates a population where people are willing to steal — from Savings and Loans or from the corner store — when given the opportunity?

**Slow Police Response**

Some have argued that the disaster could have been prevented if the police had responded more quickly to the outbreak of the disturbance at Florence and Normandie avenues in South Central Los Angeles.

This theory also fails because it ignores the pent-up energies in the population — at large — that took three days to quell. And although the police are certainly implicated in the burning of Los Angeles, it isn’t because of their response or lack of it on the day that the disturbances began. No, their role in the conflagration was brewed for several decades prior to the beating of Rodney G. King. It consisted of a paramilitary posturing that was at once dehumanizing and brutal.

It is also incorrect to view the violence and destruction as a reaction to the verdict exonerating the four LAPD officers. That verdict was only the precipitating event to the crisis.

**Revolution?**

Some view the disturbances as a form of popular "revolution" against the power structure. Although partially valid, this view is an overly romantic notion of what took place in April and May, 1992, on the streets of Los Angeles. A true revolution is carefully planned and orchestrated. Los Angeles, 1992, was much more a case of spontaneous combustion.

**A Society in Distress**

The true causes of the traumatic events this summer run much deeper than a criminal fringe or a culture of poverty or an angry response to the miscarriage of justice. They emanate from the core of modern society. That core reveals a society in very serious distress.

**Ideological Underpinnings**

America was founded on several cherished ideals: freedom, self-determination, democracy and equality. But these ideals have been frustrated in their realization because of the history of privilege for a small fraction of the human landscape in America: White men.
Thus, beginning with the founding of our nation, freedom was practically defined as the freedom to exploit. Millions of Africans were bound in chains and forcibly brought to the Americas to serve White society.

In like manner, the indigenous populations — the American Indians — were treated like warlike savages and systematically exterminated by the “civilized” European colonizers, who, in fact, were the ones with the superior war fighting capability.

It is in acknowledging this history of exploitation and cultural imperialism that we see the myth in the ideal of self-determination. The Africans and Indians, certainly, had no opportunity to practice self-determination. Thus, the individual and group achievements of the European colonizers (and their descendants) must be viewed with some suspicion (if not derision) when we take this history of human exploitation into account.

The idea of democracy, although laudable, was obviously in name only as the same groups being exterminated and enslaved — and women — were denied access to the ballot box well into the twentieth century. For many, the right to cast a vote remains illusory.

These contradictions in American ideals and realities are prime ingredients in the mixture of causes of L.A.’s recent trauma.

Racism, Favoritism and White Privilege
The one American ideology that was not so mythical — and that is deeply implicated in what has gone awry in our nation — is racism. Racism — the ideology espousing the inherent/genetic superiority of White people — provided the cultural and scientific justification for the human exploitation that took place over the past several hundred years.

The ideology of White racial superiority gave rise to political, legal and economic systems that favored Whites at the expense of people of color. And although the structured racial/ethnic inequalities in American society were finally abolished in the 1950s, vestiges of favoritism and White privilege remain.

Virtually every White person in America is privileged by virtue of his or her race. And that privilege comes at the expense of people who are not White. Two examples illustrate this point: Babe Ruth and the William Randolph Hearst family.

Babe Ruth was a legendary figure in American popular culture. His renown transcended baseball as he became an icon of American individualism, self-determination and hedonism. Today, his heirs profit by licensing the Babe Ruth name for over $500,000 per year.

But Babe Ruth played ball in the nineteen-teens and the nineteen twenties — a time when baseball was rigidly segregated along racial lines. It wasn’t until 1948 that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in professional baseball. Babe Ruth, whose renown was in hitting home runs, never had to bat against some of the best ball players — people like
Satchel Paige — who were remanded to the Negro League. So his fame and fortune depended, in part, on his being White. His heirs continue to reap the rewards of that racial privilege.

The William Randolph Hearst family, in like manner, is a cultural icon by virtue of their fabulous wealth. They are the family who built the Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California. But the Hearst family did not come to their wealth by the sweat of their brow, alone. The family got their start as Missouri farmers, scratching out an existence with only a few acres of land . . . and a few Negroes.

One can only imagine what would have become of the Hearst family if they did not have the head start provided to them by slavery — a system of White racial privilege that existed on the backs of African captives.

The point, here, is that all of the wonderful achievements of White America were not fairly won. If we did not have a history of several hundred years of slavery and subsequent racial discrimination, the whole complexion of America’s power structure would be very different. And just as Babe Ruth and the Hearst family benefitted from this system of racial privilege, so too has virtually every other White person on this continent, past and present.

Another precipitant of the ‘92 Fires is the re-distribution of wealth that has taken place in America over the past 10 or 20 years. This redistribution of wealth took place according to the formula of White privilege that has defined America’s political economy for the past several hundred years: the rich have gotten richer while the poor have increased in their deprivation and suffering.

Racial Hierarchies and Racial Conflict
The corollary to the idea of White supremacy is the idea of Black inferiority. And it is this idea that brings us closer to understanding the roots of L.A.’s conflagration.

The belief in the inferiority of dark skin people has been one of America’s most widely exported commodities. Anti-Black racism is found in virtually every corner of the modern world. The negative attitudes and beliefs about Black people recreate social inequality wherever it is practiced (which is everywhere), and is often internalized among the Black populations themselves. Self-loathing, then, is implicated in a host of related symptoms: gang violence, drug abuse, suicide, homicide, family dysfunction and criminality. This is the fuel to the racial fires that burns in South Central Los Angeles and throughout the city.

Given the popularity of the belief of Black inferiority and pathology, it is hardly surprising that immigrant merchants arm themselves in convenience stores and shoot-to-kill when Black customers are suspected of stealing.

But this emphasis on racial differences doesn’t just adversely affect Africans and African Americans. There seems to be a “color gradient”
that orders the racial groups according to the lightness of their skin. Latinos and Chicanos are no strangers to racial and ethnic discrimination. Neither are Asians or American Indians. It is no coincidence that the groups suffering the most in modern society are those groups that are more darkly pigmented.

**American Violence**

What happened in Los Angeles was violent in a uniquely American sense of the word. America was founded by violence; it developed through the use of violence; it exists through violence or the threat of violence. Certainly, the military buildup that we've witnessed since 1980 — a tripling of the annual military budget for instance — demonstrates a much greater concern with war than with health, education and welfare.

The federal spending for violence is mirrored in the popular culture in the form of motion pictures, television dramas and Saturday morning cartoons that are immersed in violence. The firebombing of Iraq in 1991, was a precursor to the firebombing of South Central Los Angeles last summer.

The powerless imitate the powerful in using violence to resolve conflicts.

**Communities in Distress**

South Central L.A. is a pressure cooker. So, too, are the economically depressed areas of Pico-Union and East Los Angeles. The 1992 fires and looting may best be viewed as a "letting off of steam." What contributes to the incendiary pressure in the inner cities of Los Angeles?

The health, education and welfare of L.A.'s inner city are at an all-time low. Virtually every indicator of social well-being shows a significant decline over the past ten years.

The number of single parent families is at an all time high; school achievement is at an all time low; health problems are worse in the inner cities than anywhere else; and the legions of the homeless are an omnipresent fixture in the urban landscape.

We've witnessed a decline in earning power of the working poor (and the middle class). The minimum wage has increased from $3.25 in 1980 to $4.25 in 1992, while prices for staple items such as food and housing have doubled or tripled in the same period.

The community's deprivations are revealed in the nature of the looting that took place in April and May. People targeted stores that sell the necessities for living: food, clothing and household furnishings. One of the most indelible images of the looting was of the man with a shopping cart full of baby food and disposable diapers.

But the physical hardship of the inner cities is exceeded by the spiritual and psychological devastation. Decades of impoverishment, in the midst of a generally growing economy and an ostentatiously rich upper class, creates a sense of psychological despair, alienation and hopelessness.
And resentment
The resentment, then, gets vented in the expression of anti-White violence — as in the case of the infamous beating of the truck driver, Reginald Denny.

These were the incendiary conditions for the massive demonstrations — looting, arson, murder — that we witnessed in April and May, 1992. It was a rebellious riot. It was an uncontrolled epilepsy of violence. Although we cannot justify the violence, it is not difficult to understand.

One of the most tragic elements in this tragedy of tragedies was the self-destructive nature of the violence. For those of us who live in South Central Los Angeles, we mourn the destruction of our neighborhoods. The burning was a symbolic suicide. Now, our suffering and deprivation are that much worse.

Phoenix Rising?
Like the legendary bird, the Phoenix, can Los Angeles rise from the ashes? What are the solutions to the multiplicity of societal ills that plague us?

There is hope in the ashes. That hope lies in the recognition that something is terribly awry in our society. In the conflagration that consumed Los Angeles we witnessed the nadir of Western civilization.

The L.A. fires were a “wake-up call” to the politicians and policy makers who have been complacent about those who are disenfranchised from the mainstream of modern society. If we look, listen and learn, then perhaps we will chart a brighter future for our city and country. If we ignore the lessons from the L.A. tragedy, then it will be repeated.

In this period of recovery we need to ventilate our rage, fear and sadness. But more than an emotional catharsis, we need to identify the solutions to the problems that confront our city and country. If we mis-identify the causes of the L.A. fires, then we can have no hope for effective redress.

The solutions, then, require more than a clean-up effort or the rebuilding of structures and businesses. Instead, they require a multifaceted approach to the re-structuring of our society.

We must recognize the structural inequities as well as the contradictions in our ideals. Racism must be eliminated. Racial hierarchies and racial favoritism must be eliminated.

The governmental responses to the crisis, unfortunately, imply an ignorance of the true underlying causes of the urban despair in Los Angeles and elsewhere. More than rebuilding physical structures, the emphasis should be on rebuilding the human spirit. The federal “Weed and Seed” program is a slap in our face. Not one of us — including criminals and gang members — are “weeds.” The so-called welfare reform proposals, that seek to reduce the already paltry levels of social support, can only wreak havoc on those who are already desperately poor.
This exhibit, No Justice, No Peace, is the first stage of an artistic response to the crisis. In it, we see the pain and anguish that led to the inferno. We glimpse some of the conditions that gave rise to the unbridled rage. We find an expression of the horror we felt as our neighborhood and city disintegrated. As time progresses, we'll see more hope in the artistic responses to the tragedy. Through art, we can envision a brighter future.

We should paint a portrait of what it is we really want: good and competitive schools; children with a facility for reading, writing and computation; a population that is technologically literate; a healthy environment; homes for everyone; decent jobs and adequate wages; a harmonious relationship with others; and peace in our home, communities, and nation. Once we visualize what it is we want, we can create policies and programs that bring these visions to reality.

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