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1968: U.S. Cities Burn - II

Lead: Introduction: *A Moment in Time, 1968*: A special series on the 40th anniversary of a year of upheaval, in a world seemingly out of control.

Content: In the wake of the legal triumphs of the civil rights movement, many African Americans recognized that fundamental change was many years away. Some radicals in the black community were not shy about manipulating these frustrated expectations into violent acts of protest and destruction.

The 1968 signal for reaction was

the April assassination of Martin Luther King. Race riots broke out in over sixty American cities. The irony was that such actions were against everything King, the champion of non-violent protest, stood for. Some of the most egregious and spectacular damage occurred in Washington, D.C. Black activist Stokely Carmichael, former president of the Students Non-violent Coordinating Committee, encouraged stores to close out deference to King, then with incendiary language he whipped up black emotions at a rally at 14th and U Streets, “if we must die, we better die fighting back” and “it’s time to end this non-violence bullshit.” He told his listeners to return home if they didn’t have a gun. His speech was one of the

sparks that set the city ablaze.

Shortly thereafter, an innocent young white man was beaten to death when he pulled over to get gas in the area and then the looting and violence began in earnest. Blacks began setting looted buildings on fire. The National Guard and then regular Army troops were called in but it took two days for the disturbances and arson to be contained. Destruction reached within blocks of both the White House and the Capitol. In places rioters blocked white firemen from putting out buildings set ablaze. Before the flames of violence were extinguished over 1200 persons had been injured, 9 were dead, and over 6300 had been arrested.

The outbreak of black rioting in 1968 fueled a powerful white backlash that took political shape in the years ahead as conservative politicians called for a restoration of law and order and traditional values in a society that seemed to be losing control of itself.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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<http://www.nbc4.com/1968riots/index.html>

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