

Newark Remembers the Summer of 1967, So Should We All

BY CLEMENT ALEXANDER PRICE

One could easily argue that Newark, New Jersey far exceeds other American cities in one important way—its embrace of what Yale University historian David Blight calls the memory boom. Speaking last February at the annual Marion Thompson Wright Lecture Series program at Rutgers-Newark, Professor Blight claimed that American citizens are far more interested in the nation's collective memory than ever before. I believe he is right. I came to Newark in 1968. At the time, it was a city whose residents remembered their past as if their very lives depended upon their veracity. It is still a city shaped by memories.

Over the past generation, many Americans turned their attention to the memories of Jewish refugees who survived the Holocaust and came to the United States seeking to rebuild their all but shattered lives. Another narrative in our memory, American slavery, is now in high relief as a result of the oral testimonies of former slaves that have been long ignored but are now of intense interest to students of America's past. That once all but forbidden topic, slavery on American soil, is now remembered, written about, and discussed like never before. The same may be said of our interest in the memory of the

Newark's collective memory is a local one . . . For forty years, the city's memory has been stirred by the tragic events of the summer of 1967, when on July 12 civil disorders, widely remembered as "the riot," ended one era of Newark's history and began a new period that we are still witnessing . . .

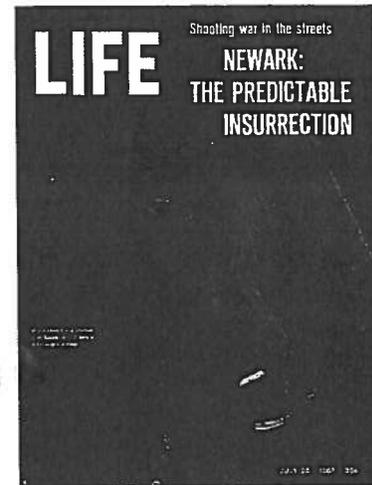
modern civil rights movement, now more than a generation after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the passing of many who joined him in an effort to humanize race relations in the American South.

Newark's collective memory is a local one. Newark seeks to first and foremost remember Newark, one might say. For forty years, the city's memory has been stirred by the tragic events of the summer of 1967, when on July 12 civil disorders, widely remembered as "the riot," ended one era of Newark's history and began a new period that we are still witnessing: Newark's long climb out of the infamy of its contested memories. Whether one believes that the riot was the beginning or the end of an era is probably less important than what one remembers about those five days from July 12 to July 17, 1967. Some, actually most, will remember those days through the lens of race. The riot, after all, can be seen as a racial upheaval by a black community that had long suffered discrimination in employment, housing and civic empowerment. During the late 1960s, Newark, for the longest time a predominately white ethnic city, was destined to become a predominately black town. Within the context of contemporary American history that meant a city destined to decline, a city that whites would abandon, and a city that the nation at large would view negatively.

Others will remember the riot as a betrayal of what they thought Newark once was: a vibrant city with intact, safe neighborhoods, a city that was, put all too simply, home. Still others will remember that the riot, should it be called that, was a police riot waged against local black residents by poorly trained, overwhelmingly white male and frightened contingents of the New Jersey National Guardsmen, New Jersey State Police and local police. Their behavior at a time when cooler heads did not prevail was at once irrationally violent and racially motivated.

Why does Newark need to remember 1967? And why, forty years after twenty-six residents were killed during the riots and where whole American neighborhoods were destroyed, is Newark's fervent interest in its collective memory important to the nation at large?

We now know that Newark, perhaps more than any other American city, was likely to have a catastrophe like the one that



unfolded between July 12 and July 17, 1967, because fewer individuals than ever deeply cared about the city's larger welfare and its future. Beginning in the 1930s, the city was penalized by federal public housing and transportation policies because of its rich ethnic and racial diversity. In short, a generation before Newark became predominately black, it was an ethnic city of first and second generation Americans of immigrant stock. By the post-World War II years, when Newark was well on its way toward its near rendezvous with disaster, those ethnics were well on their way to becoming a part of the American mosaic of whites. Indeed, their passage from being white ethnics to whites was the defining transformation in post-World War II New Jersey. It enabled the sons and daughters of the Ellis Island immigrants to economically move up in New Jersey's cities and ultimately to leave those cities in the grander search for assimilation in the suburbs. African Americans also participated in that transformation, but not nearly as prominently as their white ethnic counterparts.

But what is now known is not necessarily what is remembered about Newark's summer of discontent. Most Newarkers are seemingly unaware of the larger forces at work in their city around the mid-1960s. Their memories are challenged. They view those years through memories of their old neighborhoods, their youthful conceits, their race and ethnicity, and, most especially, through how the riot changed their lives. Their memories, though rich, are impoverished by what they could not have known at the time their lives were turned upside down.

Admittedly, that is the way our memories work. Our memories are selfish—we remember through a lens of our own making. Our memories are also time sensitive—we remember in the moment of the event deserving of being remembered, such as armored vehicles rolling down Belmont Avenue, or rifle totting National Guardsmen firing into high-rise public housing projects and other places where black citizens lived.

What, then, should be remembered from Newark's 1967 summer of discontent? First and foremost, those who live in and care for Newark should remember that the days from July 12 to 17 were brought on by a generation of racial injustice played out on Newark's troubled streets, in City Hall and in other sectors of local society. Long before the summer of 1967, the city had lost its empathy for newcomers, especially those of color, those from the southern states, those from the Caribbean, and those whose history energized Newark's black and brown civic militancy. At the time, Newark did not want to hear from its

But what is now known is not necessarily what is remembered about Newark's summer of discontent. Most Newarkers are seemingly unaware of the larger forces at work in their city around the mid-1960s.



seemingly new black militants. Had city fathers known something of the history of Newark's black community, they would have easily recognized in the rhetoric of the militants a then long standing complaint against the city's notorious treatment of poor blacks from the American south.

Now that we are more than a generation removed from the violence, the senseless misconduct by law enforcement agencies and, alas, the deaths of twenty-six victims of the horror of that summer, those who lived through that summer may just want to check their memories. They may want to look at that era through several lenses, including the lens of social class (most of the victims were poor blacks), the lens of historical scholarship (Newark was indeed declining prior to 1967, at a time when New Jersey was becoming a suburban centered state) and the lens of reconciliation. Newark never convened a truth and reconciliation commission to make sense out of tragedies of that summer, so for forty years those who lived through that summer have largely fended for themselves, never really certain of all that contributed to the disorders and the nearly generation long aftermath of stark decline and racial and ethnic rage. Soon after the riot ended, Governor Richard Hughes convened a group of distinguished New Jersey civic leaders to study the causes, but their report, *A Report for Action*, has been all but forgotten. For many Newarkers—blacks, whites and browns—the memory of the summer of 1967 remains embittered and the defining moment in their lives. During this season of commemoration, when Newark will once again demonstrate the tenacity of its collective memory and its determination to move forward as a livable city, let us hope that the memories of that now distant era will be enriched by the passage of time and what we now know about our contested and complicated history.

Clement Alexander Price is Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor of History and Director, Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience at Rutgers University.