

The Pain and Power of Remembering 40 Years after the Newark Riots

There is much that is revealed about a people, a city, a nation, by what it chooses to remember. What we celebrate, what we memorialize with monuments, what graces the walls of our museums, and what myths we cherish tell a great deal about how we want or hope to be perceived. But even more illuminating is what we choose to forget. Moments and events that are ripe with ambiguity, pain, evil, and contested memories are often shunted into the dark corners of the American past where too few people wrestle with the implications, meanings, and continuing resonance of this history. This is especially true of the "long hot summers of the 1960s," where urban uprisings, insurrections or riots – from Watts to Detroit to Newark- dominated our news and scarred our psyches and our cities. This unwillingness to remember reflects both the challenge of negotiating conflicting memories and the need to face candidly the still unresolved issues and crises- from poverty to discrimination to crime- that continue to affect and shape our urban centers.

In the summer of 1967, I was a fourteen year old who looked forward to playing football for Belleville High School that fall. I was born in Newark and spent several years living in apartments on Jelliff Avenue and on Broadway in North Newark until my family moved into the house in Belleville where my grandparents had lived since the 1920s. Even though Belleville was home, Newark was the center of my existence. I cannot count the number of times we took the "13 Broad" bus "down Newark." I remember the excitement of walking amongst the Saturday crowds along Raymond Boulevard or Market Street with my father as he searched the array of shops, or the embarrassment of being with my mother and my aunt for what always seemed an eternity in the Ladies Department of Orbach's, or the pride I felt seeing my grandfather's name still on the window of his dental office on 235 Springfield Avenue nearly a decade after his death.

Newark provided the opportunity for a boy struggling to find his identity to immerse myself in black life. Whether it was the religious teachings and spiritual uplift of Clinton Memorial Church where my family had worshipped for three generations, or the more secular, and sometimes profane, lessons that I learned from the stories shared by the fascinating and illuminating crowd at Coleman's Barbershop, or the history and connectivity that came from the periodic gatherings of family at backyard cookouts, Newark seemed like a place of possibility and promise to a boy on the verge of adulthood. Yet that sense of possibility and promise was not shared by all who lived in the Newark of forty years ago. For many, the lack of political influence in a city that was 50% African American, the continuing sting of poverty and discrimination, the mistreatment and disrespect from the police force, the inequities in housing and education, and the lack of visible outlets for change, contributed to the frustrations and outrage that led to the explosion that gripped Newark beginning on the evening of July 12th.

The full force and meaning of what was happening in Newark became clear to me on the evening of July 13th. As I walked through a Belleville neighborhood that was not my own, a police cruiser cut in front of me as I crossed a street. The Officer ordered me to stop. And when I did, he quickly spread eagled and pushed me face down onto the hood of the car. I remember just how hot the hood of the car felt against my face and then he began to demand that I turn over my matches. I did not understand what he meant. I told him that as a football player, I did not smoke and so I had no matches. I was so naive. Then as he put more pressure on my arms and back, he said that he knew that I was “a nigger from Newark” and that I was sneaking into Belleville to set fires. After a few more minutes of pain, the officer asked my name, and when he realized that I lived in Belleville, he told me to go. No apology, just go. At that moment, I knew. Regardless of who I was, where I lived, whether I was an athlete, or a good student with college aspirations that race would shape both my present situation and my future possibilities. As I made my way home, I passed the corner of Mill Street and Washington Avenue, one of the boundaries that separated Belleville from Newark. And there was checkpoint made up of police cars and barricades to make sure that the violence would not spread outside the city. Looking back, it seems that those barricades were not just to supposedly confront urban unrest but also to limit change and possibility.

So why is it important to remember a period of pain where scores died, hundreds were injured, and the city was damaged in ways that it has not yet recovered? We honor those who experienced those days by remembering, by remembering their loss, their sacrifice, and their belief in a better day. More importantly, only by remembering do we have a barometer to measure what has changed and what has really been accomplished. And much has changed—for some. Black political influence now dominates cities like Newark. There is a larger, more thriving black middle class. The most obvious manifestations of the racism that gripped America have been exposed and confronted through statute or court decision. And it has been a long time since I was thrown over the hood of a police car. As a result of that summer I read less about George Washington and more about WEB DuBois. I decided that I would use history as my preferred weapon for racial justice and change.

Ultimately, we remember the history of Newark during July 1967 because those memories force us to confront the change that still is needed in America's cities. These memories allow us to celebrate the significant progress that has occurred but it must also challenge us to do better. In every city, one can turn a corner and think that it is still 1967. Commemorating the uprising in Newark must help to redirect the nation's attention towards its cities. We must remember in order to build a Newark that is ripe with possibility and promise for all.

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