

English 114
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The Watts Riots: Proving That Violence Can Cause Social Change and Integration
by David Talbot

Beginning in the 1950's, the Civil Rights Movement pushed for equal rights for African Americans and other minority groups. As the movement progressed, two leaders divided the country's opinion on the correct method of gaining justice: Martin Luther King, Jr., was an outspoken pacifist, while Malcolm X advocated responding to violence with violence. The nonviolent movement is historically viewed as the more successful of the two because it led to legislative changes. The legislation however did not immediately cause an improvement in the living standards of many African Americans. This continuing deprivation can be seen by examining Watts County, Los Angeles. The Watts riots of the summer of 1965 showed that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had had no visible effects on Watts County, and that daily life in Watts had remained the same for its citizens even after the passage of the supposedly transforming legislation. The success of the Watts riots in causing a frightened government to respond with real attempts to increase living standards in Watts further showed that it took violence to make the government implement and enforce the legislation that the nonviolent movement had brought about. While the nonviolent civil rights movement was essential because it provided the necessary groundwork, particularly legislation, to advance the possibility for an improvement in African American civil rights, nonviolent action alone was not enough: in some areas of the

country – areas like Watts county – it was the combination of violence and nonviolence that led to actual changes in the lives of African American citizens.

The creation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is largely credited to the success of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his nonviolent approach to the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Act intended to end racial discrimination in the United States by insuring equal voting rights and outlawing acts of segregation, along with other provisions. In a 1965 interview with *Playboy*, King directly attributes President Kennedy’s decision to propose the Civil Rights Bill to “the image of Birmingham,” referring to King’s Birmingham Campaign (Playboy 351). The lasting “images” of this campaign include the Birmingham police’s use of fire hoses and dogs to interrupt demonstrations and the monumental march on Washington D.C., when 250,000 demonstrators descended on the capitol demanding social change. King’s claim that he is responsible for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is also indirectly supported by Malcolm X in “Message to the Grassroots”: there, X attacks King for being too close to the white power structure, specifically to John F. Kennedy (Grassroots). Although King and X regard this connection differently, both examples support King’s nonviolent movements undeniable link to the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

But while King’s movement caused legislative change, it did little to affect daily life for most African Americans. In “The Ebb Tide of Integration,” Stanley Sellers argues that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been poorly enforced and that future prospects of enforcement did not look much better. Sellers specifically looks at President Nixon and the Republican policies that limited or inhibited enforcement. He declares that Nixon’s refusal “to use the withholding power to bring about enforced integration” and his appeals to racist voters in the South inflamed the nation’s racist sentiments and provided evidence of the forthcoming lack of enforcement (Ebb

Tide). However, according to Sellers, the Democrats, who claimed that enforcement “wasn’t the answer anymore,” were also blameworthy for their lackluster efforts in insuring enforcement and for ignoring the failure to ensure enforcement of the act (Ebb Tide). Sellers counters the Democrats claim that enforcement was not necessary by declaring that although enforcement would not have resolved all racial issues, it would have been “foolish” not to take advantage of the laws already in place (Ebb Tide). Sellers’ article represents the feeling across the country that not enough was being accomplished in the Civil Rights Movement and that the legislation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had not successfully ended segregation or led to better living standards for many African Americans.

An example of an area that had been experiencing this “Ebb Tide of Integration” was Watts County, Los Angeles. In “The Language of Watts,” Stanley Sanders described his return home to Watts County one week before the riots began. “I was eager to see,” wrote Sanders, “what changes had been made. I was soon let down” (Language of Watts). The community, Sanders laments, was a bystander to the gains of the civil rights movement and to the growth of Los Angeles (Language of Watts). Sanders disappointedly noted that nothing had changed about the neighborhood; there were no new buildings, and the same community problems still existed - the only time Watts County appeared in the news was to report another knifing or shooting. According to Sanders, daily life in Watts County, as in many urban areas across the United States, remained largely unchanged by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The resentment that Sanders observed in Watts exploded in August of 1965 with a seemingly insignificant incident. Marquette Frye, an African-American, was arrested for drunk driving just outside of Watts County. Frye continued to resist arrest while the size of the crowd watching the incident grew to over 1000 people (Commissioner’s Report, 1965 10-11). The

police finally subdued Frye, but as they were leaving the scene, a woman from the crowd spat on a police officer (Commissioner's Report, 1965 12). The police went into the crowd and arrested her as well. Rumors of the arrests began to circulate, including that the police had beaten a pregnant woman, and that they had mistreated Frye (Commissioner's Report, 1965 13). Violence followed, igniting six days of chaos in Los Angeles's Watts County. Rioters looted stores, set fires, shot at policemen and firemen, and beat up white onlookers (Commissioner's Report, 1965 1). By the end of the riots, 34 people were dead and another 1,032 were injured (Commissioner's Report, 1965 1). The area experienced \$40,000,000 in property damage, and 3,952 people were arrested (Commissioner's Report, 1965 1). 46.5 square miles were controlled by military authority before public order was restored on August 17th (Commissioner's Report, 1965 1).

Five days after peace was restored, a Governor's Commission was assigned to investigate the riots, which represented the first sign of the change in Watts. Their reports were documented in "Violence in the City - - An End or A Beginning?" It concluded that there was no single cause for the riots; they included Employment and Education, among others. Regarding education, the Commission unveiled the failures of the schools in disadvantaged areas like Watts County. The average fifth grade student was unable "to make use of reading or writing for ordinary purposes in daily life," and the dropout rate was staggeringly high; 30% of students entering high school dropped out before graduation (Commissioner's Report, 1965 50). Achievement scores in Watts were significantly lower than the city average in all grades and all subjects. The report suggested a series of solutions to overcome the low achievement. They urged the creation of "Emergency Literacy Programs," including a reduction in class size, and extra funding, and proposed that a permanent pre-school program be set up to prepare children for school. Also, they noted the lack of qualified teachers in the disadvantaged schools, and that these schools had fewer libraries and

cafeterias. The solution of the problem of education should, it was thought, reduce unemployment: the Commission stated that unemployment was the most serious and most pressing problem for Watts. It reported that the high levels of unemployment had led to a feeling of resentment toward society (Commissioner's Report, 1965 38). The Government had already tried to alleviate the problem with little success; its plans were not numerous enough nor were they well organized (Commissioner's Report, 1965 40). The Report suggested that the existing job training programs must coordinate with each other, and more importantly, with real job opportunities so that upon completing training, potential workers can actually find jobs (Commissioner's Report 43). Finally, the report pressed for further job training and placement programs, and for ending discrimination in the workplace.

A series of reports on the implementation of the commission's recommendations that followed the original investigation proved that the riots had successfully caused change in Watts County. The second report, in 1967, lauded the attempts up until that date, although it insisted that there was still much more that needed to be done in the region. Pre-school programs were set up in Watts County, although only a small percentage of eligible children were participating in them (Staff Report 1). The California Legislature began to provide more funds to enable schools to decrease class size (Staff Report 3). Libraries and Cafeterias were provided to all schools in the disadvantaged districts (Staff Report 7). Regarding Education, the Cooperative Area Manpower Planning System was formed in 1967 to coordinate the unemployment problems (Staff Report 12). There was an increased effort by many businesses to import workers from disadvantaged areas (Staff Report VII). Significant increases in infrastructure, if fully utilized, provided the opportunity to train more disadvantaged workers (Staff Report 8). Overall, the

government did respond to some of the Commission's recommendations. This response proved that violence did change living conditions for the citizens of Watts.

The Watts riots provoked interest in the government to discover the causes of the violence and figure out the necessary steps to solve the problems. Although not all of the recommendations had been implemented by the time of the second report, some changes had been made that affected daily life in Watts County. The changes that were made to benefit the citizens of Watts resulted directly from the riots, seeking to prevent further riots from breaking out in Los Angeles. Therefore, whether or not it was the goal of the riots, they did in fact succeed in changing the living conditions of the residents of Watts County. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, in contrast, did not cause a visible change as the riots had. There are many plausible why the Civil Rights Act did not create more change. Continuing racist sentiments may have stopped the government from enforcing the laws. Enforcing all of the provisions of the Act most likely would have been expensive for the government, which had little money to spare during the Vietnam War. Voting percentages in Watts and other disadvantaged areas may have been low, so it is possible that there was no voting bloc to please in those areas. As seen in Stanley Sanders' editorial, for whatever reason, Nixon and the federal government were not rushing to enforce the Civil Rights Act.

Even though the Civil Rights Act did not cause the direct changes in Watts County, it was essential as a stepping stone to the result of the Watts riot. The Civil Rights Act made it possible for the Commission to make the recommendations that it did. The Civil Rights Act intended to end all kinds of discrimination, including racial, in the United States. It is possible that without this legislation, the Watts riots would have been handled very differently by the government. More extreme military force could have been used in stopping the riots. After

having stopped the riots, the government could have further separated Watts County from the rest of Los Angeles rather than trying to uncover and solve the issues in the area. The Civil Rights Act also declares equal distribution of funds controlled by federally assisted programs. Without this law, the commission possibly would not have noted the unequal distribution of money to poor schools, or spent more money attempting to improve employment for African Americans.

Martin Luther King, Jr., believed that African Americans could achieve social equality entirely through the process of nonviolent civil disobedience. King dismissed violence because he believed that it was impossible to achieve integration through the means of violence. The evidence of the Watts riots suggests that, at least in this circumstance, King may have been wrong. While it is likely that the changes would have eventually been made whether the riots happened or not, the riots acted as a catalyst, speeding up the governmental response to enforce the Civil Rights Act. Ironically, King said it best himself; “it [the nation] is now *forced* to address itself to race relations and poverty (A Testament of Hope 313).” In a country that prided itself on democracy and equality, the riots were a wakeup call that alarmed the government and gave it no other option than to respond positive. Efforts were made to integrate African Americans into the workforce, and minority education was given higher priority and more funding. Contrary to King’s belief, the Watts riots did not lead to more violence in Los Angeles; the riots caused change that socially and economically benefited many African Americans in Watts.

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