

1396

MEMORANDUM

To: Arthur Johnson

From: Burt Levy

SUBJECT: LOS ANGELES INVESTIGATION

Date: September 3, 1965

According to your instructions, I was in Los Angeles on August 25-28 to obtain information on the civil disorder which occurred in the Watts area during the previous week. The specific purpose was to probe the events leading to the riot, the course of the riot itself, and what has been done since by public officials and private citizens. The following report is not intended to be a complete evaluation and description (the McCone investigatory commission may possibly supply the complete story) but rather to add information over and above what has appeared in the public press.

In the course of the investigation, I toured the Watts area twice and spoke with a cross-section of citizens. I also had conversations with six taxi drivers (2 Negro, 4 white) and both Negro and white citizens outside of Watts. In addition I had formal interviews with the following individuals:

Mr. N. B. Houston, President, L.A. NAACP
Mr. Ernest Shell, Area Director, Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Co.
The Reverend Dr. Thomas Kilgore, Pastor, Second Baptist Church, L.A.,
Area Director, Southern Christian Leadership Conference.
Mr. Larry Lucks, Area Director, California Fair Employment Practices
Mr. Adrian Dove, Consultant, California FEP
Mr. Hugh Taylor, Consultant, California FEP
Mr. John P. Lyons, Asst. Exec. Director, Los Angeles County Commission
on Human Relations
Mrs. G. Helene Ashby, Detective, Human Relations Div., Los Angeles
County Sheriff's Department
Mr. Curtiss Howard, Detective, Human Relations Div., Los Angeles County
Sheriff's Department.
Mr. Harvey Schechter, Asst. Dir., Los Angeles Anti-Defamation League.

The rioting which began at the Watts area of Los Angeles on August 11, 1965, appeared to be the unfortunate combination of (1) the underlying social and economic conditions of the residents of Watts; (2) an incident involving several Los Angeles policemen and a Negro mother on a busy street; and (3) the fact that this occurred on one of the warmest, most humid evenings of the year.

Watts is one of the three "named" areas in the Negro ghetto in the south-central part of Los Angeles. The conditions of the residents have been documented in the public press: Some 30% of the men between 20 and 40 years are unemployed; about 50% of the residents rent their homes; density of population, though low according to standards in Detroit or New York, is the highest in the Los Angeles area. For example, from 1950-1960, the total population in Los Angeles increased 26%, while the Negro population rose 96%. During this period, some 4,600 people moved into the Watts area at a time when only 300 new units were constructed.

For those who said bewilderedly after the riot that "Negroes were better off in Los Angeles than in most other places, because even their ghetto has gardens and palm trees," the insightful answer given by the National Observer was, "It is irrelevant to tell the Los Angeles Negro that his slum is better than Harlem or Selma. He knew that. But he also knows about Beverly Hills and the Sunset Strip, and that good life in which he has little share."

The Negro community, like the general community, is in a general state of confusion and is clearly unorganized. NAACP, for example, only employs a part-time executive director and has an extremely small membership. CORE, SCLC, and SNICK are organized, but also with a small membership. Clearly no-one has made any attempt to organize, or communicate with people in the Watts area.

Although the state has a FEP Commission, and Los Angeles county has a Human Relations Commission, the general community and leadership appeared either indifferent or hostile to the just demands and grievances of the Negro community. Prior to the Watts riot, the city of Los Angeles was the only major city in the nation not to have begun its Anti-Poverty program. Last year, the people in California voted 2-1 in favor of a referendum to legalize discrimination in housing. Only 200 of some 5,000 Los Angeles police officers are Negro. Although mayor Yorty promised the Negro community before his election four years ago that he would fire chief Parker, he has reversed his position and completely supports the police chief. Chief Parker and city policemen in general are considered enemies by the Negro community. The chief has a habit of making inflammatory statements, whether intentional or not. Policemen, many who have come from southern states, are considered to be brutal and discourteous. An example of the police-Negro hostility appears evident from the fact that the burning and violence against the police ended at the city-county line although the Negro ghetto extends several miles further and is essentially an integral part of the Watts community life.

THE ACTUAL RIOT

On August 11, at 7:30 p.m., two highway patrolmen (State Police) stopped a 21-year old Negro man for reckless driving. The arrested man's mother and brother appeared on the scene, and a small crowd began to gather. The highway patrolman called for reinforcements, and several Los Angeles policemen appeared. Somehow, the mother landed on the sidewalk with a Los Angeles patrolman standing above her. A portion of the crowd included members of a youthful Negro gang, and it is reported that they pushed in toward the policeman. As police reinforcements were called to the scene, the gang leaders placed telephone calls to leaders of other gangs (who traditionally had fought one another) and requested that they divert the police by causing incidents and calling false fire alarms in other sections of the ghetto.

A staff member of the FEP, who lived in the Watts area until two years ago and is familiar with the gangs, reports that the major incidents and fires were the calculated work of the several gangs. Once the disorder began, others joined in, including the average citizen who saw an opportunity to get some furniture or jewelry that he saw each day in the windows of the local stores, or to lift credit files of the stores, addicts who saw an opportunity to break into drug stores, and general hoodlums.

There was considerable controversy about whether or not different methods of police action might have stopped the riot on the first or second day. On the morning of August 13, the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission reviewed the events of the previous night and formally requested that as many plain-clothes Negro officers as possible, from the Los Angeles Police Department and Sheriff's office police the area that night, talk with people, and where necessary, make arrests of violators as quietly as possible; that uniformed white officers be placed in strategic areas outside the effected area, to be called by Negro officers if they were unable to control the situation; that before dark, all traffic in the main arteries of the riot zone be closed so that no white motorists would be targets for renewed rock throwing.

The Los Angeles Commission met with the gang leaders who said they would be able to stop the rioting if no white officers were in the area. A spokesman for the Police Department replied: "We are not going to have hoodlums telling us how to run the Police Department." The rest of the story, including the National Guard, is history. On August 16, Governor Brown finally formally announced that the situation was "under control."

THE AFTERMATH

Since the end of the rioting, public officials, civil servants, business and Negro leaders have been continually attending meetings in an attempt to do something to alleviate the possibility of a future occurrence.

. 1) LeRoy Collins and Mayor Yorty reached an agreement about the composition of the Board to administer the Poverty program, and the funds have been released. Several offices in the Watts area have already been opened for programs to help Negro citizens start businesses, and for retraining.

. 2) The state government has opened a temporary office in the Watts area that will house representatives of state agencies that have a responsibility to the citizens of that area. This includes:

1. Department of Employment.
2. Department of Industrial Relations,
 - Division of Apprenticeship Standards
 - Division of Fair Employment Practices
 - Division of Industrial Welfare
 - Division of Labor Law Enforcement
3. Department of Public Health
4. Department of Social Welfare
5. County of Los Angeles, Bureau of Public Assistance
6. Department of Rehabilitation
7. Department of Housing
8. Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity
9. State Attorney General, Consumer Frauds Unit.

. 3) The Negro community organizations are attempting to organize and reach the people in the Watts area. The NAACP held its first "town meeting" in the area last week. They have renewed demands for chief Parker's removal and for an end to the perceived inequities. Reverend Martin Luther King met with the publisher of the Los Angeles Times and has apparently persuaded him to take an interest in publicizing both the needs and the accomplishments of the Negro community.

. 4) The State and County civil rights agencies are meeting with all kinds of individuals and groups for one reason or another. The Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission is continuing its emphasis on the "power structure." FEP, with a full-time personal representative of Governor Brown, has been meeting with Negro organizations including the Muslims.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MICHIGAN

- . 1) We have a responsibility to make certain that the people of this State know, as President Johnson put it, that a "time bomb is ticking" in Michigan too. Unquestionably the ingredients for potential civil disorder exist in Detroit, Saginaw, Jackson, etc., or in any community where at least several thousand people live in abject poverty, exploited by merchants and property owners, with little hope of improving their or their childrens' lot.
- . 2) The Commission has done a credible job of communicating with business, civic leaders and government officials: But we, too, have not yet begun to reach either the lower or middle class in the minority group communities. I propose that we seriously consider coordinating an effort to get our agency and other state governmental agencies who have a message and a responsibility to people in these neighborhoods, to open local offices as is now being done in California. At a minimum, I think we should consider at least having a representative of this Commission have office hours in these neighborhoods, even if it means simply getting a desk in a neighborhood Conservation, Urban Renewal, or Poverty office.
- . 3) Because these riots are inevitably triggered by a police incident, we must concentrate greater efforts on our police-Negro relations program, particularly in those communities that have a riot potential. Just as it is important to let the Negro community know that they have a right and a responsibility to file complaints against discourteous or brutal police officers, positive steps and events concerning Police must also be widely publicized. For example, it is noteworthy that this Commission has not received a complaint against a Detroit police officer for the past two months. I would also recommend that in addition to urging Police Departments to hold meetings with Negro groups and in Negro sections, that it may be necessary for our staff to directly work with a Precinct Captain, or a Police Chief, in making certain that these meetings are arranged, well publicized, and effective.
- . 4) Finally, it appears that one of the basic ingredients involved in this kind of rioting is a wide-spread sense of hopelessness felt by the rioters. People with a stake in society and with something to lose, do not engage in an undertaking designed to destroy their community. The MCRC is the one state agency with the legal power and the resources to communicate directly and forcefully with minority group members and to make it clear that there is hope. I think we must say to the entire community time and time again precisely what the rights of every citizen in Michigan are, even if this means that the ultra-conservatives and the bigots will cause us a great deal of trouble.