

BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Controlling Riots: A Sensible Role for a Well-Regulated Militia?

When orthodontists gather at their annual convention, there is little fear that a riot will break out among the dentists, no matter how lively the meetings may become. Local police don't put the troops on alert "just in case."

Yet that is precisely what a Los Angeles police commander requested in the spring of 1992 in anticipation of a not-guilty verdict in the brutality charges brought against the police in the Rodney King case. However, permission was denied. Shortly after the jury's acquittal of the officers was announced, the rioting and looting broke out and 51 people were killed, more than 2,000 injured and large sections of Los Angeles burned down at a cost of nearly \$1 billion in property damage. This was the worst U.S. riot in modern times. [See the figure.]

There was no coherent police response during the first 36 hours of this moral holiday, and eventually more than 20,000 police and soldiers were required to restore order.

What are riots? Riots are wild and destructive disturbances created by a large number of persons. They can be far more ruinous than the ordinary crime that occurs every day.

The conventional explanation for riots is that a dramatic event like an unpopular jury verdict converts festering social resentments into mass violence. The rage is said to stem from a sense of social injustice as a

result of racism, poverty and insufficient federal spending.

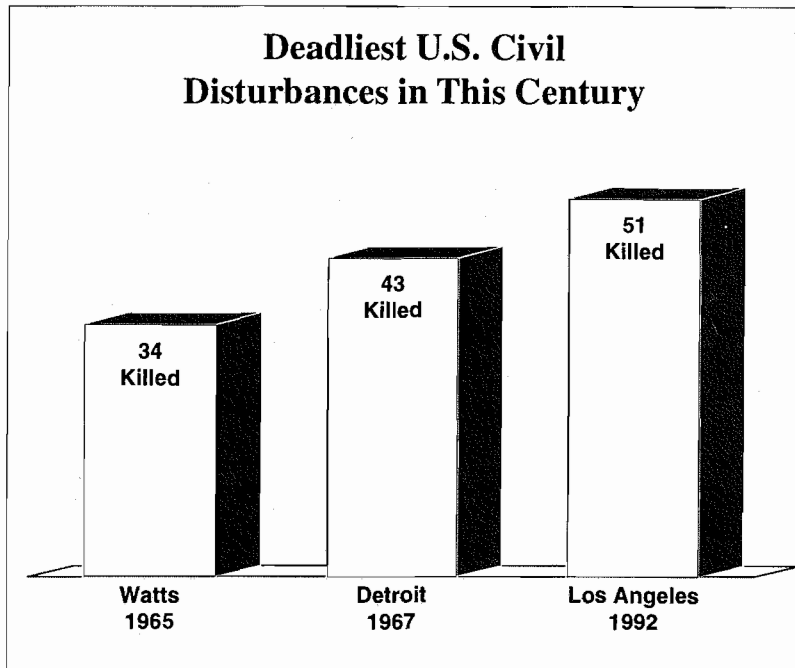
Yet this explanation won't wash. How can social conditions, which are chronic, result in riots that are only episodic and infrequent? Moreover, riots and mob actions *can be triggered by good news*, such as a Super Bowl victory (Dallas) or an NBA championship (Detroit). Exhilaration rather than rage characterized the mood of most rioters in these instances. Beating, burning and looting were marked by an air of festivity as well as anger.

Nor is rioting necessarily confined to one class. College students riot at spring break and the well-to-do engage in riotous behavior at events like Mardi Gras. By contrast, many of those helping the victims of rioters and opposing mobs are themselves poor, from racial minorities and unemployed.

How do riots get started? A group of riot-prone people must mass in one place while the police

do not mass at a corresponding rate. An "incident" like a soccer match or a jury verdict performs a coordinating role, telling rioters when and perhaps where to congregate. Television, of course, can help rioters find each other along so-called "action nodes," or locations. Violations must then occur rapidly enough to overwhelm the police. From a rioter's point of view, there is safety in numbers.

Someone has to go first, however, putting himself at risk if the police are willing and able to zero in on him. A "riot entrepreneur" must calculate that the risk for initiating the action is low enough to be acceptable, or that the cause is worthy enough even if capture appears imminent.



The rioter knows that the risk of capture decreases as the size of the crowd and the probability that others will follow his lead increase. Breaking a window, especially by throwing a stone, is a standard signal to begin the riot because it diminishes personal risk of arrest and alerts everyone with a destructive-sounding noise. If enough people follow, the violence and looting spread until the civil authorities muster the decisiveness and force to make the rioters believe that they once again face a realistic threat of arrest and punishment.

Who riots? Most people are too concerned with middle-class respectability to participate in a riot. On the other hand, British football hooligans, members of the underclass and young men who feel they have “nothing to lose” are excellent candidates. Certain people thrive on the chaos and revelry that accompany a riot—intoxication, illegal drugs, fighting, anarchy, harassing and beating respectable people and vandalizing their property. They enjoy being part of and sharing a crowd’s power, especially its power to flout the law.

How can a riot be stopped? Once a riot gets started, it can be stopped only by a visible increase in the probability of catching an offender or an increase in the harshness of the consequences if the offender is caught.

Police brutality can end riots promptly. The Sardinian police militia, for example, brutally smothered a soccer riot during the 1990 World Cup matches. Hundreds of rowdy English soccer fans had flown in on chartered planes and were looking for trouble. The police followed a textbook military strategy, massing forces and surrounding first one and then another group of hooligans, beating each group senseless with truncheons. The riot soon collapsed.

Since the ability to quell a riot is directly related to the police’s ability to use force, stopping a riot is difficult for civil authorities who are as legally constrained as American police forces are. The rules of constitutional law set stringent limits on how police officers may treat those whom they try to arrest, and limited budgets keep police forces smaller than the numbers needed in such an emergency. Moreover, the National Guard is not well adapted to the mission of early containment of a riot because it takes several days to respond.

A well-regulated militia. Since the ability to rapidly mobilize large numbers of trained law enforcement authorities is vital to stopping a riot, one solution is more coordination among police agencies. Another is far

greater use of reserve law enforcement officers in an emergency. Called auxiliaries or “specials,” these civilians can be deployed quietly and quickly and demobilized just as quickly. Like a modern equivalent of the militia envisioned by the American founders, ordinary citizens bear the ultimate responsibility for the security of the communities in which they live. There are as many as 250,000 reserve police officers and deputy sheriffs across the United States today, boosting the number of peace officers by more than one-third.

In Ohio, for example, there are an estimated 18,000 reserve officers, the most of any state. And the San Bernadino, California, sheriff’s department, with 1,100 reserves, has a larger contingent than any other department. Most reservists are required to receive the same training as regular law enforcement officers, wear a badge, carry a gun and take part in regular law enforcement operations when they are on duty. Reservists are required to serve a minimum number of hours each month and attend in-service training. Although there are exceptions, reservists generally are not considered employees of the police or sheriff’s department and therefore usually do not receive pay.

Preventing riots. Confronting potential rioters with a massive show of coordinated force can stop a riot before it begins or shut it down quickly, saving lives and property. Every major American city should have a contingency plan, the trained manpower in reserve and the political will to ensure that destructive outbursts like the Los Angeles riot of 1992 become rare indeed.

The lesson of hundreds of riots across the world is clear: the crucial determinant is the civil administration’s response. Vacillation means disaster. Peace officers must act. “There is no alternative,” according to the late University of Chicago sociologist Philip M. Hauser. “The forces of order must be mobilized as quickly and overwhelmingly and employed as vigorously as possible. Otherwise you have anarchy.”

Based on David D. Haddock and Daniel D. Polsby, “Understanding Riots,” Cato Journal, Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring/Summer 1994, pp. 147-57. Haddock and Polsby are law professors at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

Also see Eugene H. Methvin, The Riot-Makers (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1970).