

In Detroit, ‘the rage of oppression.’ For five days in 1967, riots consumed a city.

By [DeNeen L. Brown](#)

, Reporter

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The 11-year-old boy stood on a corner on July 23, 1967, and stared in amazement as a dry cleaners in his neighborhood burned. The fire flickered and jumped with a kind of fury the boy had never seen. From across the street, he could feel the intense heat of the flames, fueled by the dry-cleaning chemicals. Suddenly, the first floor collapsed into the basement.

“You could feel cool air come out of the basement,” recalled Darryle Buchanan, now 61. “Then all of a sudden these rats came running out of the building and they were on fire. There were rats running down the street on fire.”

During the five days that Detroit burned, Buchanan watched the unrest through the eyes of a child. He lived with his paternal grandparents, his mother and siblings in a house off Virginia Park, which was about eight blocks from 12th and Clairmount, the epicenter of the violence.

“I had a schoolmate hit by a stray bullet,” recalled Buchanan, the director of My Brother’s Keeper for the state of Michigan. “He got hit in the thigh. He was the first guy I ever knew who got shot. He got shot outside playing. He lived two blocks from me. After that, my brother and sister and I slept in the dining room under my grandmother’s table — all week. They were telling us to stay below the window. Nobody had lights on at night during the curfew and black outs.”

Tensions over police brutality had been building in Detroit for years. More than 95 percent of the police force was white and perceived as a “white occupying” force in a city that had suffered from entrenched racism, segregation and lack of jobs.

“Negroes have always held, the lowest jobs, the most menial jobs, which are now being destroyed by automation,” novelist James Baldwin wrote in an essay in 1966. “No remote provision has yet been made to absorb this labor surplus. Furthermore, the Negro’s education, North and South, remains, almost totally, a segregated education. And, the police treat the Negro like a dog.”

In the early morning hours of July 23, 1967, those tensions erupted into some of the worst riots of 20th century. Then-Gov. George Romney called out the National Guard and thousands of paratroopers from

the 82nd Airborne arrived. Cyrus Vance, a Defense Department official and future Secretary of State, flew to the Motor City to manage the situation for the Johnson White House.

When it was declared over on July 27, 1967, 43 people had been killed — 33 blacks and 10 whites — including one police officer, two firefighters and one National Guardsman. During the five days of rebellion, 1,189 were injured, more than 7,200 people were arrested. Hundreds of buildings were burned.

Romney declared a state of emergency in Detroit, Highland Park, Hamtramck, Ecorse, and River Rouge.

Other cities experienced racial unrest in 1967, including Newark, where 26 were killed and hundreds were injured. But Detroit's was the "deadliest, and we had the most arrests," said Marlowe Stoudamire, project director of "[Detroit 67: Perspectives](#)," an exhibition created for the Detroit Historical Society to help people understand what happened.

The violence began at 3:45 a.m., on Sunday, July 23, 1967, when an undercover Detroit police officer slipped into a "blind pig," an unlicensed after-hours club in the Economy Printing Building at 12th and Clairmount streets.

William Scott Jr., who led the United Community League for Civic Action, was hosting a party in the group's offices for two black soldiers who returned recently from Vietnam. "The rooms were packed with over 80 revelers," according to Detroit67.

The undercover officer ordered a beer and waited 10 minutes, a signal to a vice squad to move in. Police held those arrested on 12th Street for more than an hour, as paddy wagons transported them to the 10th Precinct police station. A crowd gathered to watch, then grew angry as black people were shoved into police vans.

A bottle was thrown at police officers. And just like that, Detroit exploded. Some people called what happened a riot; others called it a rebellion; and some called it a revolution.

"We call it a rebellion for a few reasons," Stoudamire said. "It wasn't planned. There was no one person leading the charge. It was an instance of people pushing back against an established authority — that being the police."

On July 28, 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which would become known as the Kerner Commission, to find the causes of riots that had erupted across the country, including unrest in Los Angeles, Chicago and Cleveland in 1965 and 1966. It sought to answer "three basic questions: What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?"

Members of the Kerner Commission visited the cities where riots had occurred, talked to witnesses and experts. In a report in March 1968, the commission argued that discrimination and segregation threatened the country's future, concluding: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."

Women and children walk past the burned remains of homes a short distance from 12th Street. After the unrest, the city's population decline that had already begun accelerated. (AP Photo/File)

Buchanan's neighborhood was forever changed by the summer of 1967. Before the rebellion, everything his family needed was right there: a butcher, a dairy, a hardware store, a barber shop, a pharmacy. "And the Chit Chat Lounge — a part of Motown history," he remembered. As a kid, he would sit behind the alley of the Chit Chat and listen to bands playing inside.

On the morning of the rebellion Buchanan recalled getting ready for church. "I was an altar boy at St. Agnes. I had to do the 8 o'clock mass," he said. "I was up that morning ironing my vestments and getting ready to go to service."

The phone rang. It was his mother calling from Henry Ford Hospital, where she worked in the emergency room. "My mother told me, 'You are not going to church this morning,'" and then explained there were riots on 12th Street.

He woke up his grandparents, and they went on the front porch.

"We could see people coming from 12th Street, going down our street," which was about seven blocks over. "The neighbors were coming out, and everybody was talking about what was going on. Then things just accelerated as more people were waking up, going up on 12th Street and watching the looting. It started with a small number of people then the numbers grew."

Buchanan saw people running down the street with shopping carts. "I actually saw a guy running down the street with a side of beef over his back," he recalled. "I thought, 'What are you going to do with that?'"

Buchanan couldn't believe what he was witnessing. "I kept going back up on 12th Street and just witnessed the destruction going on," he said. "It was like a war zone. Like nothing I'd ever seen before," he said.

On the second day, he peeked out his grandfather's bedroom window and saw National Guard troops with rifles pointed stalk a phantom sniper in his backyard — which turned out to be a TV antenna."

“Just seeing that many armed men in your yard with guns draw, that was scary,” he said.

Another night, Buchanan watched a neighbor, who had just returned from Vietnam, climbing out of a first-floor apartment window, dressed in fatigues and carrying a rifle.

“He fell to the ground and had his rifle strapped over his shoulder,” Buchanan recalled. “I never saw that guy again. I don’t know what happened to him.”

His mother, a nurse, was escorted to and from work at the hospital in an unmarked police car. Once, his mother was driven home in a National Guard tank.

“I saw a tank pull up in front of my house. I was staring and thinking, ‘What is this?’ A soldier climbed out and then he helped my mom climb out of this tank, with her little white uniform and shoes.”

Detroit never recovered from those five days of violence. The city, which once had a population of million, would lose nearly 500,000 residents as people fled to the suburbs.

His grandparents would continue to live in the yellow brick house after Buchanan left for college.

“There were no fires on my street,” said Buchanan, who now lives in Southfield, Mich. “But now the houses are abandoned, or torn down. Grass, trees and weeds growing inside the houses.”

“A lot of people say, ‘Why do people burn down their own communities?’ I ask why did patriots throw tea into the Boston Harbor?,” Buchanan said. “In Detroit, we didn’t have bales of tea to throw. All we had was right before us. The rage of the oppression taking place would be manifest in some fashion. The rebellion was how it manifest.”

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