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Riot and Reunion: Forty Years Later

In the summer of 1967, Plainfield, New Jersey, and scores of other US cities exploded in racial violence. Forty years later, the impact is still palpable.

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A year after I graduated from high school, my hometown--Plainfield, New Jersey--exploded. Over three nights and four days, starting on Friday, July 14, 1967, the riots in Plainfield's black ghetto resulted in one death (a local policeman), forty-six injuries (half due to gunfire), 167 arrests and an estimated \$700,000 in property damage. The Plainfield riots forty years ago were part of that long hot summer of civil disorders in 163 US cities, including Detroit and nearby Newark.

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Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

That summer, President Lyndon Johnson appointed a Commission on Civil Disorders--often called the Kerner Commission after its chair, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner--to examine the causes of the urban unrest and to make recommendations for change. The following year, I read the task force's report, issued as a paperback book. I was stunned to see, among the thirty-two pages of photographs, one of my friend and high school classmate Maurie Brown.

In the photo, Maurie is standing in a white T-shirt in an apartment in the West End Gardens public housing project, the riot's epicenter, looking shocked and distressed by the clothes and furniture strewn around the room. The National Guard and state police had just invaded and ransacked the homes of many ghetto residents, looking for forty- six semiautomatic rifles that had been stolen a few days earlier from the Plainfield Machine Company, a weapons manufacturer. The photo's caption simply says, "The inside of a Plainfield home after National Guardsman and the state police have finished their search for arms."

When the riots broke out, Maurie was a student at a college in Virginia. He was home for the summer, working at the youth center in the city's black ghetto. He went on to become a schoolteacher and athletic coach in Plainfield's schools, and later a computer programmer for AT&T.

Last November, my Plainfield High School class held its fortieth reunion. Thanks to the reunion, I renewed my friendship with Maurie. He had moved from New Jersey to North Carolina a few years ago, but he came back for the event.

Maurie recounted that in the middle of the riot weekend, he had been at the beach (which New Jerseyans call "the shore") with friends. When he returned on Sunday, he recalled, his neighborhood was like a war zone. Police and residents "were shooting like it was Vietnam." The street lights had been shot out; overturned cars littered the streets. Dozens of stores had been looted and burned down. "It was kind of scary sleeping on the floor" of his apartment to avoid the bullets, he said. And when the National Guard came through his housing project looking for the stolen guns, "there was nothing we could do. They just came in, threw things around and left."

With a population of about 46,000, eighteen miles from Newark, Plainfield was both an

industrial city and a tree-lined bedroom suburb. In the 1950s and '60s, it had a thriving downtown commercial district that attracted shoppers from throughout central New Jersey as well as many large manufacturing firms. Plainfield's wealthy white neighborhoods, like Sleepy Hollow, had huge Victorian homes built in the late 1800s, many of whose residents commuted to jobs in New York City. It also had middle-class and working-class white areas with postwar bungalows and ranch houses owned primarily by second-generation Italians and Jews. The small black middle class lived on the east side, while most low-income blacks, many newly arrived from the South, lived in the larger West End neighborhood.

Like other Northern cities, Plainfield experienced an influx of blacks beginning in the 1950s. While the city's overall population remained roughly the same, the number of black residents increased from 5,724 in 1950, to 9,836 in 1960, to 18,749 by 1970--40 percent of the population. Just as large numbers of blacks were arriving, several of Plainfield's largest industrial employers--including the Mack Truck factory, which moved its 2,700 jobs to Maryland in 1961--left the city. The exodus of factory jobs was particularly devastating for the poorly educated black men living in the West End.

At Plainfield High School, well-known for its outstanding sports teams and its high-achieving students, many of whom went to Ivy League colleges, Maurrie was one of the few black students, especially those who lived in the West End area, who had close white friends. The city's only high school, like Plainfield itself, was de facto racially segregated. Most whites and blacks lived in separate worlds. The high school's rigid "tracking" system channeled middle-class white (and a handful of black) students into the college-oriented classes and most working-class white and poor black students into the auto repair classes and the less-challenging academic classes. Only 5 percent of black students were in the highest of the three-track system. The tracking system had serious consequences. Six of the seven PHS students who were subsequently killed in Vietnam were black.

White and black students played together on the baseball, football, basketball and wrestling teams, in the school band and the choir. Few of them, however, formed close friendships across racial boundaries that would lead them to visit one another's homes, attend one another's religious and social events and stay in touch as they pursued their lives and careers.

In the mid-1960s, Plainfield High School was a caldron of racial tensions, although many white students were oblivious to these realities. Black students at PHS identified some teachers they considered racist, who would stop them in the hallways for minor infractions of the dress code or for being late to class--behaviors that these teachers would ignore among white students. Fistfights and other clashes regularly broke out between black and white students. One day in 1966, students discovered that the words "nigger steps" and "nigger entrance" had been painted on the high school.

Race wasn't Plainfield's only divide. The exclusive Plainfield Country Club, for example, banned both Jews and blacks. Real estate agents, banks, restrictive deeds, word of mouth and social pressures made it known that several wealthy neighborhoods were off-limits to Jews as well as blacks, even if they could afford to buy a home there.

For years black residents--including the local NAACP chapter, black ministers and others--had complained about various forms of racial discrimination, including housing segregation and slum conditions, school segregation, racist hiring practices by major employers (including the city government and the local hospital), low-wage jobs, lack of recreational facilities for West End young people (especially a neighborhood swimming pool) and harassment by local police. By 1967 only five of Plainfield's eighty-one cops were black. Black leaders and their white liberal allies complained that cops and radio dispatchers often used the word "nigger" to describe suspects over the police radio.

As Maurrie Brown remembers, "There were cops who everyone [in the West Side ghetto] knew were racist. If they caught you on the other side of Seventh Street [the ghetto boundary], they'd stop you."

Like many urban areas in the 1960s, Plainfield was a ticking time bomb, but the city's business leaders, city government, school board and daily newspaper (which had only one black reporter) consistently ignored the grievances, and occasional protests, of black residents. In 1967 Plainfield's municipal government was dominated by Republican businessmen and lawyers who were reluctant to bring federal job training and other antipoverty programs to the city. The mayor and nine of the eleven part-time volunteer city council members were white; one of the black council members was a Republican whom blacks called an "Uncle Tom." The other black council member was a schoolteacher who tried, without much success, to serve as a mediator between the black community and the white power structure.

On Friday night, July 14, at the White Star Diner, a popular hangout among black youth, a bully in his mid-20s punched a teenager, splitting open his face. A white Plainfield cop moonlighting as a private security guard refused to intervene. The teenager's friends asked the cop to call an ambulance and arrest the bully, but the cop called the teenager a "troublemaker," wouldn't call an ambulance and refused to drive him back to the West End after his wounds were treated. Angry about yet another example of police racism, between 150 and 200 black youths assembled in the parking lot of the West End Gardens housing project, met with one of the black council members to vent their frustrations and then marched around the neighborhood for more than two hours. Soon they started throwing rocks at police cars and through store windows.

The violence escalated over the next few days and nights, reaching a crescendo on Sunday, July 16. That night, a veteran cop, John Gleason, stationed at an intersection three blocks from a housing project, violated orders and chased a group of black looters into the West End ghetto. He fired three shots at Bobby Williams, a 22-year-old black man, seriously wounding him. At that point, a group of angry black youths stomped Gleason with a shopping cart and left him unconscious. Williams eventually recovered from his gunshot wounds, but Gleason died within an hour of the altercation.

Gleason was known in Plainfield's ghetto as a racist—he was reported to have shot a black child the previous year. "Gleason was rotten to the core," Maurrie Brown recalls. "He would nightstick anyone. If he wasn't there, maybe things wouldn't have gotten out of hand."

The National Guard arrived in Plainfield at 12:30 AM that night. Within a few hours, the looting and shooting had ended. New Jersey Governor Richard Hughes declared a state of emergency, allowing the National Guard and state police to enter West End homes without warrants to search for the stolen weapons. The angry West End residents viewed them as an invading army. The director of the State Department of Community Relations called off the search after ninety minutes, fearing that the racial tensions would escalate again. The weapons were never found.

The riots that erupted on July 14 should not have surprised the city's business, political and civic leaders, but their responses revealed how out of touch they were with conditions and feelings in Plainfield's black community. During the four days of rioting, efforts by local black leaders to negotiate a truce failed because the mayor and other politicians refused to compromise.

Even after the riots, city leaders showed little willingness, or capacity, to adopt more than token changes. For example, the West Enders finally got a municipal swimming pool. But the riots had shattered Plainfield's self-image and self-confidence. The changes that overtook Plainfield were not those that either the city's white establishment or its black residents

wanted. Soon after the riots, Plainfield's largest department stores closed, and other downtown merchants moved to the growing number of suburban shopping malls. The city's central business district began to resemble a ghost town of boarded-up buildings and empty lots. In 1972 even the *Courier-News*--Plainfield's longstanding daily newspaper, owned by the Gannett chain (where I worked during my college summers)--moved to the suburbs.

In 1971, after more protests and litigation, the school district initiated a desegregation plan. But because white flight had dramatically accelerated, real school integration between blacks and whites was difficult to achieve. Between 1970 and 1980, blacks' share of Plainfield's population grew from 40 percent to 60 percent. In 1967 blacks accounted for 52 percent of PHS students; three years later, they were 69 percent. Today blacks make up 70 percent, and Hispanics (who began arriving in the 1980s) represent 29 percent of PHS's student body. Only ten of PHS's 1,836 students are white.

Eventually, these demographic changes had significant political consequences. Plainfield elected its first black mayor in 1981. Since then, African-Americans have dominated the city council and school board. But the city they inherited became increasingly characterized by what political scientists call a "hollow prize"--a tax base too inadequate to generate the revenues needed to provide decent schools and public services. With the exodus of businesses and the middle class, home values plummeted, while poverty and unemployment increased. These problems were exacerbated by major cuts, beginning with the Reagan Administration, to federal housing and social programs. As politicians and community residents have battled over scarce and declining resources, racial tensions between blacks and Hispanics have worsened.

Despite some islands of gentrification by gay (including former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey) and black professionals, who have purchased and fixed up some historic homes, Plainfield's population has become much poorer. By 1999 Plainfield's per capita income, \$19,052, was only 70 percent of the state's \$27,006. About 16 percent of Plainfield's population, and 22 percent of those under 18, lived below the poverty line. Today, almost two-thirds of the students in the school district are eligible for subsidized meals. Plainfield's school test scores are dramatically below those of the surrounding districts, which are predominantly white and middle class.

It was telling that my fortieth high school reunion event did not take place in Plainfield but at a hotel in Iselin, ten miles away. The reunion organizers could identify only eight classmates who still live in Plainfield, although many reside in the nearby suburbs.

Of my graduating class of 514 students, about 150 people--one-third of them African-Americans--showed up at the reunion. For those who couldn't make it that weekend, some classmates organized mini-reunions in Florida, California and Boston, areas where many of us now live.

For a few months prior to the reunion, many of my classmates renewed old acquaintances, and even forged some new ones, through a website and blog created for the reunion. The hundreds of comments touched on many topics. Mostly, the graduates--now in their late 50s--wrote about their lives, careers and families. We reminded one another of favorite and not-so-favorite teachers, the music and performers we enjoyed, the TV shows and movies of our high school years, our favorite hangouts and restaurants, "what ever happened to?" questions about missing classmates and memories of classmates who had died. People contributed old photos and reminiscences to the PHS reunion website. It was an interesting mix of nostalgia and self-reflection.

After my classmates returned home from the reunion, they posted many photos of the reunion on the website. With some exceptions, the photos reveal that my white classmates and black classmates sat at separate tables and joined in separate conversations. Forty

years later, and, still, two separate worlds.

But what I found most interesting--and troubling--about the conversations via the blog and subsequent emails, and at the reunion event itself, was that my classmates hardly discussed the most dramatic event that shaped our hometown and our school--the 1967 riots--or the racial and economic conditions that led up to it.

"Nobody spoke up about it," said Maurrie Brown. "People were there to see old friends and have a good time. They didn't come to dwell on problems."

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