

The Long, Hot Summer of 1967: A Forgotten Season of Riots and Urban Unrest Across America

The Book of Ecclesiastes says that there is nothing new under the sun. And while many have spoken of the “unprecedented” nature of the rioting in the early summer of 2020, it is actually quite preceded.

The Long, Hot Summer of 1967 was the peak of urban unrest and rioting in the United States in the lead up to the 1968 election. While there are certainly a number of key differences, there are also a number of striking parallels that make the topic worthy of discussion and examination.

The long-term impact of the urban unrest of the summer of 2020 is unclear, but the long-term impact of the Long, Hot Summer of 1967 and related urban rioting was a victory for Richard Nixon in 1968, and a landslide re-election in 1972. One must resist the temptation to make mechanistic comparisons between the two, and we will refrain from doing so here. But the reader is encouraged to look for connections between these events and more recent ones.

Prologue: The Ghetto Riots

The riot wave in America’s urban ghettos might have peaked in the summer of 1967, but it certainly didn’t begin there. 1964 is generally thought to be the beginning, with a riot that began in Harlem after the shooting of a 15-year-old black teenager named James Powell.

The story of how this happened is familiar to anyone who read the news in the summer of 2020: The superintendent of a building in a predominantly white working-class neighborhood turned a hose on black students who had been congregating on the stoops of his buildings. The black students alleged that he used racist language with them, a charge that he denied. It is worth noting how often alleged racial slurs are invoked as an excuse for violence. In any case, no one disagrees that the students then began throwing garbage can lids and bottles at him. He retreated into his building where he was pursued by three of the students, one of them being James Powell.

A white off-duty police officer, Lieutenant Thomas Gilligan, arrived on the scene and fired three shots at Powell. One of these was a warning shot, but the other two connected with Powell’s forearm and abdomen. Lieutenant Gilligan claimed that Powell had a knife, raised it and then he fired first a warning shot, then a shot into the forearm to disarm him before firing the third shot. Gilligan had an impeccable record with the **New York Police Department**. Powell had a few interactions with the law: twice for boarding a subway car without paying, once for breaking the window of a vehicle and once for an attempted

robbery (he was cleared of the robbery).

The result was a week of rioting that left one dead, 118 injured and 465 arrested.

Between the Harlem Riot of 1964 and the Long, Hot Summer of 1967, there were riots in Rochester, New York, Dixmoor, Illinois, Philadelphia, Watts, Chicago, Cleveland, Waukegan, Illinois, San Francisco and Benton Harbor, Michigan. But the Long, Hot Summer was when things really picked up.

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