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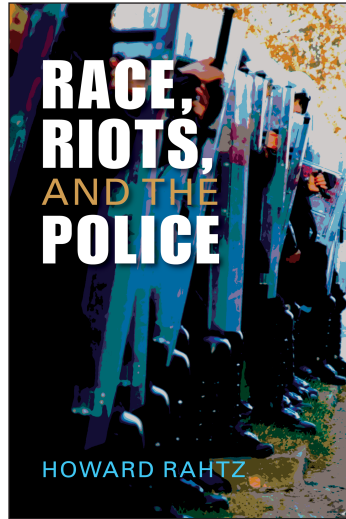
Race, Riots, and the Police

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1

Race, Riots, and the Police

The black-white rift stands at the very center of American history. It is the great challenge to which all our deepest aspirations to freedom must rise . . . we forget who we are, and we make the great rift deeper and wider.

—Ken Burns, filmmaker

The fissure between the police and the African American community remains a major challenge for US society. Race-related riots, the violent manifestation of that rift, are one of the most devastating events that occur in a community, leaving deaths and injuries, economic damage, heightened racial tension, and increased crime in the aftermath.

Race relations is a complicated collection of issues that touch on virtually every aspect of American life. When race relations explode into rioting, police action will almost certainly be the spark.

The particular elements leading to racial violence have changed over the years. While race riots occur in the context of a convoluted mix of social, economic, and cultural factors, policing consistently remains a crucial piece of the equation. It would be overreaching to designate police action as the sole factor in race riots; nevertheless, the importance of the police in preventing and effectively responding when disorder occurs can hardly be overstated.

Race riots are nearly as old as the country itself. As a starting point for understanding the police role in these events, it is necessary to go

back nearly 100 years. In 1919, race riots broke out in a number of cities around the country. That time became known as the Red Summer due to the widespread and violent nature of the riots—which were characterized largely by white mobs attacking the black community, while police either stood aside or in some cases acted in collusion with white rioters. In Chapter 2, I discuss the Red Summer riots in Chicago, Washington, DC, and Elaine, Arkansas. This was a period of particularly virulent racial animosity, when hundreds of black Americans were lynched by mobs and the Ku Klux Klan was in its ascendancy.

Chapter 2 also reviews the wave of widespread racial violence that occurred in 1943. Riots in a number of cities that year were particularly lethal, resulting in significant death tolls and injuries. The riots of 1943, in the midst of World War II, proved an embarrassment for the country and provided a propaganda boost for Nazi Germany. They also represented something of a transition in riot dynamics, offering significant lessons for modern police leaders.

In Chapter 3, I turn to review race rioting from the 1960s to 2015. After World War II, large-scale, race-related violence dissipated until the 1960s. That decade became one of the most turbulent periods in race relations in the country as the civil rights movement directly challenged the racial status quo. Between 1964 and 1971, there were more than 750 riots in the country, with a large number of these following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 (Postrell 2004). While racial inequality in every facet of American life was challenged by Dr. King and the civil rights movement, policing in African American communities became a significant issue in the rioting.

The post-1960s disturbances moved policing to the predominant issue in race riots. The 1992 riot in Los Angeles, stemming from the acquittal of the LAPD police officers accused in the beating of Rodney King, was one of the most violent episodes of racial violence in our history. The news media took a central role in the King episode, with the beating and the racial attacks in South Central Los Angeles a year later captured on videotape and shown literally thousands of times on television.

At the turn of the century, police were once more the focal point of rioting. In Cincinnati in 2001, Oakland in 2009, Ferguson in 2014, and Baltimore in 2015, African American men dying at the hands of police officers led to disorder and exposed the fractured relationship between police and the black community.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of lessons drawn from the history of racial conflict. Each past episode of rioting provided guideposts to

prevent future occurrences, and a review of the history of American race riots reads as a litany of squandered opportunities.

The priority lesson of riot history is the necessity for substantial steps by police leaders directly addressing the relationship between their departments and African American citizens. Although action to improve community trust is a priority, planning for disorder must not be ignored. Nearly every episode of rioting reviewed here included disorganized and sometimes chaotic government and police response, allowing disorder to persist and intensify.

If racism remains a spear pointed at the heart of America, police use of force is surely the tip. The intersection of race and police use of force is the flashpoint for racial conflagration, and Chapter 5 reviews the complicated issue of police use of force. The chapter covers the legal boundaries for police use of force, the effectiveness of force tools available to police, the role of race in police use of force, and a review of strategies to minimize police force incidents.

The nearly fifty-year war on drugs has been a major factor in the damaged relationship between African Americans and the police. Michelle Alexander, author of the acclaimed book *The New Jim Crow*, refers to the war on drugs as the “machine of mass incarceration.” Chapter 6 reviews the racist underpinnings of the war on drugs, from the earliest drug laws to the explosion of incarceration as a result of modern drug enforcement. The chapter examines both the growth of police militarization and the erosion of constitutional protections stemming from drug enforcement.

In discussions of repairing the relationship between the police and African Americans, community-oriented policing (COP) is frequently proposed. COP as a policy was a linchpin of the presidency of Bill Clinton with his campaign promise of 100,000 new police officers added to the country’s crime fighting effort. The promise of COP was the utilization of these new police officers as partners with the community in solving crime and disorder problems.

In Chapter 7, a brief history of COP is reviewed with an examination of its potential to bridge the gap between police and the community. The concept of police legitimacy is introduced as a key factor in the process, and the synergy possible between COP and efforts to promote legitimacy is described.

Police legitimacy is a crucial concept in improving police and community relations. In Chapter 8, the dimensions of the challenge are outlined in a review of survey data measuring the depth of the gap between African Americans and the police. Analysis of steps taken by

corporate entities to strengthen brand equity, a challenge analogous to improving police legitimacy, provide a starting point for discussion of police organizational strategies to enhance legitimacy. Community engagement efforts by both individual police officers and their departments are crucial steps to build legitimacy, and a number of examples are provided. The role of social media in development of the community engagement effort is also discussed.

Chapter 9 outlines the use of community forums as a strategy to jump-start efforts at community engagement. Discussion of race relations remains an uncomfortable conversation in modern-day America, and the related topic of tension between the police and the African American community is infrequently discussed in an open fashion. However, the potential for improved trust and respect begins with these conversations.

There are a number of specific policy steps for local and state governments that will enhance community engagement. Chapter 10 explores some of these options. An issue coming out of the current focus on police-related deaths is the lack of national data on force incidents. Media stories have highlighted the fact that police-related deaths are not captured by any current reporting system, leaving leaders struggling with a problem for which accurate data does not exist.

The chapter also focuses on use of state authority in certifying police officers. While nearly all states set specific standards for certification as a police officer, the state power to decertify police officers guilty of official misconduct or criminal behavior is rarely employed. The process proposed follows the model used by state bar associations or state medical associations in disciplining members of those professions.

Chapter 11 details several specific steps for police that could contribute to lowering the tension with the communities they serve. The challenge for today's police leaders is to forge relationships with their communities that replace fear and distrust with respect and cooperation. For police officers, the failures of the past become the burden of the present. With policing front and center as the primary issue in US race relations, the current focus on police reform represents an opportunity for courageous and creative action by police and community leaders to finally move forward in closing the racial divide.