

# Detroit sifts through riot embers for racial lessons

By Richard L. Strout

Staff correspondent of  
The Christian Science Monitor

## Detroit

Back and forth across the United States in this violent summer of 1967 we have traveled now close to 9,000 miles. Some scenes have been idyllic; some poignant. The most shocking thing we have seen is the charred and angry scar in Detroit left by a riot which all but paralyzed the nation's fifth largest city for four days and took over 40 lives.

On sleazy 12th Street, driving north one month later, it looks for a minute like Berlin after the bombing. Here a row of stores is gutted. Across the way plywood sheathes bandage smashed windows. A chimney rises in a burnt-out home like a cellar hole in an abandoned New England farm. Supporting I-beams still cant against side-walls. There are pathetic scrawled appeals, "Soul Brother" meaning a Negro owner.

A cast-iron radiator is held up crazily against the sky by its connecting waterpipe in what was formerly a second-story room. The room is gone.

At its height the riot was like war; tanks trundled, machine guns spat at snipers, police sirens howled, fire trucks roared,

arsonists laughed and looted. Officials looked down almost in tears on fires that seemed to cover the whole town. Here a city fought its own people.

Cost—half-a-billion dollars.

Has the lesson of Detroit been learned by the rest of the country? In this reporter's opinion, no. The lesson is that if it can happen in Detroit it can happen anywhere. The forces of destruction and nihilism in American core cities are still there.

## Almost a model city . . .

Detroit was almost a model city in racial matters. There was a liberal mayor and governor, the most advanced summer program in the United States, and complete communication between officials and the supposed Negro leaders. It had two articulate Negro congressmen and one of the biggest middle-class Negro communities in the nation.

"We told ourselves it can't happen in Detroit," said Martin Hayden, chief editorial writer of the Detroit News. He speaks who wants all the facts but also feels the with the commitment of a newspaperman thing passionately as a human being.

The feeling of security helped betray Detroit.

Trying tactics that were successful a year



before, police did not use firearms for a couple of hours while leaders tried to "cool it" with bullhorns. The crowd grew.

"There is no evidence that anything but an immediate and large show of force will stop a riot," says city expert James Q. Wilson of Harvard.

Compressed to oversimplification, here are three things the riot indicated to some who lived through it.

The National Guard isn't trained to handle a riot. Compared with the performance of seasoned regular Army paratroopers, who were finally called in, the guard's performance seemed to some "appalling."

Second, the web of municipal life is more vulnerable to civil disorder than has been supposed. The spontaneous, new-style guerrilla tactics of skip-hop, fire bombing can black out a city.

Finally it is doubtful even yet if the nation has much notion of what it is up against: a new, violent urban underclass set apart from the rest of the community.

It is doubtful if Congress understands it. In a summer where 70 cities have been hit, the House recently laughed off the President's proposed ghetto rat-control bill, 207-106.

The reported mood in Washington is that new poverty funds should be withheld in order not to "reward" violence. To an observer here it sounds a trifle like reverse racism.

Must all 520,000 Negroes in Detroit, out of a city of 1,600,000, be taught a lesson? One of the most striking things in following the ruins on 12th Street is to note how destruction stopped abruptly at the little lawns of the middle-class Negro homes on adjacent avenues. These property-owning Negroes have the greatest stake in law and order, as well as the Negro shopkeepers whose businesses were sacked and gutted.

The black-power militants lump all whites together: "Whitey doesn't care!"

It would seem tragic if white resentment should now lump all Negroes together and finally split the two races into warring camps.

If social reform can be halted as a punishment for violence then nihilists and Communists can gleefully block it whenever they see fit.

There were whites in the Detroit mob. An

editor, a state trooper, a Negro writer all told of the nightmarish carnival mood of the affair. The crowds laughed and looted.

Recent United States census studies indicate that the 1960 count missed many Negroes, perhaps 10 percent. The highest loss rate was in young, adult males. The startling fact appears that one male in six simply dropped out of organized society. But this invisible underclass was on hand for arson and looting.

"This can happen in any United States city where a sizable part of the population is unemployed and unemployable," says editor Martin Hayden.

Causes are easier to find than amelioratives. The latter are probably more radical, anyway, than a nation preoccupied with Vietnam will accept. Well, I boldly offer the following proposals anyway.

Law and order must be preserved; everybody agrees to that.

More and more people believe that firearms must be regulated. The United States is the only great nation where this isn't done.

Twenty-seventh in a continuing summer series of reports from a correspondent assigned to tour the United States.