

## Chapter 1

# Policing Raceriotland

## *A Journey into Racist Policing and Urban Uprising*

Speaking to the California Commonwealth Club a month after the Watts uprising, Los Angeles civil rights leader H. H. Brookins pinpointed police as the central cause of the unrest. In his aptly titled speech “Watts Close Up—A Lesson for Other Cities,” Brookins reminded his audience, “The majesty of the law has for generations of Negroes, really meant the majesty of white authority.” For many African Americans, the police were the crux of a racist system of occupation, containment, and control. For African Americans, the law “has had no majesty,” Brookins explained; “it has, rather, been the symbol of oppression, and that ‘law’ has not been viewed by the Negro as an institution of the whole community, but a tool of the white authority to enforce its will on him in almost every aspect of his daily life.” Repressive policing had fueled six days of rage in August 1965 and, if left unchanged, would create the potential for future violence.<sup>1</sup> How officials and residents chose to address long-standing patterns of abusive police power would have far-reaching consequences for politics and racial equality in Los Angeles.

The Watts uprising drew strength from a legacy of frustration with racism, employment discrimination, and residential segregation. Yet racist policing was ultimately the uprising’s trigger. Under the direction of William Parker, the LAPD had operated as a force unto itself. The police defended the city’s dominant white Protestant social and political institutions themselves rooted in a history of colonialism.<sup>2</sup> “Los Angeles is the white spot of the great cities of America today,” Parker reminded residents upon his appointment as chief in 1950 of the city’s exceptional pattern of low crime but which came to embody a racialized meaning. “It is to the advantage of the community that we keep it that way.”<sup>3</sup>

Post-World War II demographic changes threatened Parker’s view of Los Angeles. New African American residents migrated from the South, and disented from white residents’ blanket support for the LAPD and the local power structure. African American residents soon lodged demands for police reform and accountability. Parker flatly rejected these calls for change, denouncing them as the work of subversives aimed at undermining the authority of law enforcement. Instead, the LAPD operated as a de facto army of occupation meant to keep the African American community contained.

The arrest of Marquette Frye on August 11, 1965, produced an explosion of antipolice rage that generated an even greater reaction of police violence against the black community. Residents openly confronted the forces of law and order, expressing their discontent with the police. Law enforcement's aggressive response to the unrest aimed to put an end to any doubts about who owned and controlled the streets.<sup>4</sup>

Many black residents placed the LAPD at the center of their analysis of the rebellion. The potential for violence would remain unless officials dealt with a police force intent on maintaining a race-based hierarchy of social control. Yet any hopes were quickly dashed. Most observers explained the unrest as the work of lawless black criminals, and the Governor's Commission to Investigate the Los Angeles Riots was no exception. Better known as the McCone Commission for its chairman, former Central Intelligence Agency chief John McCone, there was little chance it would indict the police. Testimony revealed widespread discontent with the police and evidence that law enforcement did more to exacerbate the unrest than to prevent it. But the commission accepted the view that complaints of brutality were ruses to undermine the police. Political officials blamed the uprising on a rogue criminal element and absolved the police of responsibility, shoring up the power of the police.<sup>5</sup>

The uprising was ultimately a demand for an end to police practices that maintained white authority, control, and order in black spaces. For law enforcement, it created a crisis in legitimacy that required new strategies to reassert police discretionary authority. Local officials' rhetorical commitment to reform, however, was overshadowed by a reinvestment in law and order and militarization. The Watts uprising and policy responses marked a pivotal moment in the history of policing, politics, and power in Los Angeles after which the city would never be the same. The following pages reveal that the LAPD was a racist, violent institution prior to Watts but the uprising focused attention and critique on the police. The department's response to calls for reform, however, ultimately made things worse by using the crisis of legitimacy created by the unrest to demand more authority, discretion, and resources.

### William Parker's "Thin Blue Line"

No one had a greater influence on the LAPD's operations, attitudes, and culture than Chief William Parker. When Parker became an officer in 1927, he found a department mired in graft, political corruption, and scandals. He kept his distance, then returned to the LAPD in 1947 after serving in World War II, building a reputation for discipline, political savvy, and public relations that

elevated him to chief of police in 1950, a position he held until his death in 1966. Under Parker the LAPD became the most emulated department in the country, and observers often referred to him as the “second most respected” law enforcement officer in the nation after the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>6</sup>

Parker rooted out corruption and improved the department’s image through professionalization. His program rested on scientific management, research, efficiency, and a military style of training and discipline. Strict standards for recruitment and training, high salaries for officers, and a well-equipped department would enable the police to maintain authority on the streets. Perhaps most importantly, professionalization ensured the LAPD operated independently from political influence. Despite a Board of Police Commissioners empowered by the city charter to oversee the department and appoint the chief, the board often acted as a rubber stamp following the chief’s directives.<sup>7</sup> Parker protected the department’s autonomy at all costs, and his power rivaled that of the mayor and city council. This power relied on maintaining the belief that domestic tranquility, social order, and positive community relations all required one thing only: unstinting support for the police.<sup>8</sup>

Insularity led to a profound lack of accountability. The Internal Affairs Division adjudicated all complaints, and city charter Section 202 gave the chief all disciplinary power over officers. While Parker’s reforms ensured strict adherence to internal discipline and punished officers for poor moral conduct and behavior, the Internal Affairs Division often returned verdicts of justifiable homicide in police shootings and rarely sustained complaints of abuse that came from citizens. Between January 1, 1964 and July 31, 1965, the police committed sixty-four homicides of which sixty-two were ruled justifiable. In twenty-seven of the cases, the victim was shot in the back; twenty-five of the suspects were unarmed; and four had committed no crime when shot.<sup>9</sup>

Compared with police departments in other major cities such as New York and Chicago, the LAPD had to make do with fewer officers and less financial support. The ratio of police to population in Los Angeles in the mid-1950s, according to department officials, was 1.87 officers per 1,000 residents, compared with 4 per 1,000 residents for cities such as Detroit, New York, and Chicago.<sup>10</sup> Parker developed a strategy of proactive policing to address a chronically understaffed force. Roughly 5,200 LAPD officers were spread across 450 square miles and 2.5 million residents in 1960. Proactive policing put officers into patrol cars, which reduced contact with residents, and required officers to be able to recognize a criminal by appearance, behavior, or demeanor. The proactive philosophy made the police the guardians of a “thin blue line” holding back crime, disorder, and, crucially, civil rights and Communism. Social or economic causes of crime were irrelevant to a proactive police force. “We are not interested in why a certain

group tends towards crime,” Parker declared. “We are interested in maintaining order.”<sup>11</sup>

Because the police power gave the police the discretion to both define and enforce the boundaries of order and model citizenship, any challenge to Parker’s vision of an orderly city invited intense reprisals. Nothing challenged Parker’s definition of order more than demands for equality by the city’s residents of color.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the 1950s Parker linked civil rights activists with Communism, crime, and an erosion of police authority. “The current soft attitude on the part of the public to crime and Civil Rights demonstrations,” Parker told the Sherman Oaks Rotary Club, “could lead to a form of anarchy unless halted.”<sup>13</sup> When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) charged that the “police use fear, not respect, to influence conduct” in the ghetto, Parker responded that the claim not only was “false, libelous, and defamatory,” but itself undermined social order and police authority.<sup>14</sup> Parker would not tolerate such challenges to police power. “The voice of the criminal, the communist, and the self-appointed defender of civil liberties,” Parker warned residents, “constantly cries out for more and more restriction upon police authority.”<sup>15</sup>

Command and control tactics inundated black and Mexican American neighborhoods with police, due to the perception that they were high-crime areas. Parker defended his tactics, arguing that though blacks made up only 16 percent of the population, 60.2 percent of all suspects in violent crimes were black. Although Parker acknowledged that racial and ethnic categories were “unscientific breakdowns; they are a fiction,” Parker’s theory of policing provided a defense for the use of race in proactive police work. “From a police point-of-view,” Parker explained, racial categories “are a useful fiction and should be used as long as they remain useful. The demand that the police cease to consider race, color, and creed is an unrealistic demand.” Claiming that the police “concentrate on effects, not causes,” Parker framed black and Mexican American criminality as a fact, and used it to bolster the police power’s discretionary authority to employ race as predictor of criminality and in determining threats to order.<sup>16</sup>

Perceptions of criminality, however, resulted from how the LAPD policed urban space. The department’s statistics revealed that arrest rates in neighborhoods of color were much higher when compared with those of white neighborhoods. In 1965, for example, the number of reported Part I incidents—homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft—in the predominantly African American 77th Division was 92.7 per 1,000 residents with an arrest rate of 29.9. In the white West Los Angeles Division, in contrast, the Part I offense rate was 39.0 but the arrest rate was 3.8 per 1,000 residents. Even as the 77th Division had a higher rate of

reported offenses, the proportion of offenses to arrests was much higher—roughly one arrest for every three reported—compared with the West Los Angeles, where there was approximately one arrest for every ten reported incidents.<sup>17</sup> Such disparities led one black resident to complain, “The police is brainwashed that every colored person is a criminal.” Policing practices based on racist categorizations thereby confirmed beliefs in black and Mexican American criminality that, as one observer explained, reflected “the views and prejudices held by a majority of the people.”<sup>18</sup>

Suggesting criminal behavior was inherent among blacks and Mexican Americans facilitated racist policing. Testifying to the Civil Rights Commission, Parker explained, “You cannot ignore the genes in the behavior pattern of people.” Such outright racism was widespread among officers, many of whom came from the South. While on patrol, many called black men “boy” and black women “Negress.”<sup>19</sup> Officers in the 77th Street Station, for example, employed the acronym LSMFT for “Let’s shoot a motherfucker tonight. Got your nigger knocker all shined up?” In the 1960s, the LAPD referred to the 77th Street Division as “the L.A. Congo” and the Newton Division as “Occupied Newton.”<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly such views produced an “us versus them” attitude within the department that contributed to not only police violence but also hostility toward the police.

Police abuse, unsurprisingly, was common. The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Riot Study found that 71.3 percent of black men felt that the police were not respectful and 65.5 percent believed that they used unnecessary force when making arrests. Nearly 72 percent believed the police used roust-and-frisk tactics, the term then used for what would come to be called stop-and-frisk, on a regular basis, and 65 percent felt that police beat suspects while in custody. While individual experiences with police abuse were lower, with 23 percent of respondents reporting they directly experienced disrespect and 20 percent reporting they experienced roust-and-frisk, twice as many said they witnessed such practices. Mexican Americans held similar views. Sociologist Armando Morales found that 65 percent of Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles believed that police lacked respect, 73 percent believed the police used discriminatory roust-and-frisk tactics, and 68 percent believed that the police used unnecessary force in making arrests.<sup>21</sup>

The number of reported incidents was likely only a fraction of the total, as African American and Mexican American residents saw little value in filing complaints against an unresponsive department. Federal and state law also provided the police with latitude when it came to the use of force, making legal redress difficult for victims of police abuse.<sup>22</sup> During the 1950s, for example, the NAACP filed numerous complaints that either got wrapped up in Internal Affairs Division investigations or were ignored entirely.<sup>23</sup> While

Internal Affairs Division officials claimed that roughly 40 percent of complaints were sustained annually, the statistics did not differentiate between internal complaints and those made by residents. In 1965, for example, the department received 231 complaints of the use of excessive force, sustaining only twelve, or 5.2 percent. That same year, there were 326 complaints of neglect of duty, an internal charge often made by superiors, of which Internal Affairs Division sustained 81.2 percent. Officers were also trained to bring charges of “assaulting a police officer” against suspects who had been subject to the inappropriate use of force or threatened a complaint.<sup>24</sup>

While the police were omnipresent in African American and Mexican American neighborhoods, the service they provided was negligible. Many residents desired better police service, but officers were slow in responding to calls. “It takes a long time for police to respond to calls in Watts,” a young resident named David explained, “from forty-five minutes to an hour.” Sheriff’s deputies in East Los Angeles often failed to respond to calls for emergency service by Mexican American residents. Black youth recognized the need for police service in Watts, but they objected to the constant harassment that came with that service.<sup>25</sup>

The police represented an arm of the state that did little for communities of color but keep them under control. That the department was overwhelmingly white—in 1964 there were no more than 325 black officers, and their proportion of the department ranged between 2 and 5 percent during the 1950s and 1960s, while Mexican Americans fared little better, representing roughly 6 percent of the force in 1966—and the lack of a residency requirement mandating police officers live within the city of Los Angeles heightened perceptions among residents of color that their neighborhoods were occupied territories. Hearings on police-community relations held in 1962 by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found widespread distrust of the police among blacks and Mexican Americans.<sup>26</sup> While Parker denied any problems between his department and the black community, the actions and attitudes of the police created a “bad psychological pattern” between minority communities and the police.<sup>27</sup>

As such, police-community contact resulted in a series of escalating “anti-police riot[s]” during the early 1960s. The police often resorted to force when confronted by groups of black residents because, anti-police abuse lawyer Hugh Manes suggested, “the peace officer who sees the crowd gather ‘menacingly’ does not pause to consider—then or later—whether his arrogant treatment of prisoners is the progenitor of a potentially hostile mob.” Between 1961 and 1964, there were eleven episodes of black crowds confronting officers, but LAPD officials brushed them off as isolated incidents rather than a systemic problem within the department. “Regardless of a citizen’s own at-

titude toward the police,” Manes concluded, “the latter conduct themselves with an arrogance and contempt for the Negro citizen that seems calculated to invite violence.”<sup>28</sup>

One such incident occurred on Memorial Day 1961 when officers arrested a black teenager at Griffith Park for failing to pay for a ride on the merry-go-round. The arrest led to a crowd of 200 onlookers attempting to stop the police. Members of the crowd threw rocks and bottles, yelling, “This is not Alabama.” Police swarmed the area with more than seventy-five reinforcements, and the “riot” ended with the arrest of three other black youth. The police charged one youth with assault on an officer and the other two under a 1933 law that made it illegal to remove a prisoner from police custody by “means of a riot.” This use of an antilynching law to arrest black youth further enraged many residents. Using such overwhelming force to prevent and contain future incidents, civil rights attorney Loren Miller suggested, was “in-  
ept and antagonistic” and likely to lead to violence.<sup>29</sup>

A year later, on April 27, 1962, two members of the Nation of Islam were removing clothing from a car in front of the Muslim temple when two police officers stopped to investigate. Within a few minutes, “the area . . . resembled a modern day street scene in Algiers,” as the LAPD flooded the area with seventy-five officers to disperse an antipolice demonstration. The battle ended with the police shooting seven unarmed Nation of Islam members, killing Korean War veteran Ronald Stokes. Following the incident, a meeting of civil rights leaders and civil liberties activists found that the black community “seems to be convinced that the initiator of these problems regarding relations between Negroes and the police is the police chief himself.” The Stokes killing emboldened residents who were “no longer afraid to say there is police brutality.”<sup>30</sup> While not every episode of police abuse resulted in such violent confrontation, Manes reported that “scarcely a week passes without reports in the Negro press of claims of violence by citizen and police against each other.”<sup>31</sup>

Many African American activists, however, urged the police to address perceptions of the LAPD as merely a professionalized version of “white man’s law” in the South. The United Civil Rights Committee pled to “Men of Good Will” to alter police practices that left a “long smoldering resentment.” But Parker responded with silence, and the lack of change left many black residents pessimistic about the future. “Violence in Los Angeles is inevitable, and that nothing can or will be done about it until after the fact,” Loren Miller predicted in 1964. “Then there will be the appointment of a commission which will damn the civil rights leaders and the Chief alike.”<sup>32</sup>

The deep roots of racist policing in Los Angeles had created a profound frustration and disillusionment with the possibility of fair treatment by the police. For many black residents, the history of discriminatory police practices



and patterns of mistrust left them with few alternatives but to seek remedies to police misconduct in the streets. A routine encounter between blacks and the police on a hot August day a year after Miller's warning would spur an antipolice uprising during which, as the American Civil Liberties Union's Ed Cray reported, "the very sight of blue uniformed officers was enough to provoke new waves of violence."<sup>33</sup> Despite the potential for retaliatory violence and repression by the police, many African Americans understood participation in the unrest as a moment to stand up and assert that black lives mattered. "I been kicked and called 'Nigger' for the last time," one Watts resident stated during the uprising. "There're lots worse things here than dying."<sup>34</sup>

### Burn, Baby, Burn!

On August 11, 1965, California Highway Patrol officers pulled over two African American men, Marquette Frye and his brother Ronald, for reckless driving and being under the influence of alcohol on 116th Place and Avalon Boulevard in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. When the California Highway Patrol officers attempted to arrest Marquette Frye, a scuffle ensued and a crowd of 250 to 300 onlookers gathered to observe the situation. The growing crowd and presence of Frye's mother scolding her son produced a volatile situation. When the California Highway Patrol radioed a call of "Officers needs help," the arrival of LAPD and more California Highway Patrol officers added to the tension. As one crowd member described the situation, "They [the police] act like they're fighting in Viet Nam. They have all these cops and everything around."<sup>35</sup>

When officers resorted to the use of force, kicking the Fryes, hitting them with batons, and shoving them into patrol cars, cries erupted. A woman reportedly spit at the officers, causing them to charge into the crowd to apprehend her by the neck. "This," one observer recalled, "is when the crowd became angry." Some cried out, "Goddam! They'd [the police] never treat a white woman like that." Officers on the scene, who formed a line across the street with their batons at the ready, recalled people yelling, "This is just like Selma. . . . We got no rights at all." As they made their retreat, officers hoped the removal of law enforcement would reduce the crowd's hostility. As officers retreated, rumors of police brutality spread quickly, igniting the spark that set South Central aflame in open rebellion against the police.<sup>36</sup>

Law enforcement may have pulled out to reduce tensions, but for the crowd it was a victory. Growing to over 1,500, the crowd hurled rocks, slabs of concrete, and bottles at the police officers as they drove away, then at other passing vehicles. By midnight the area was out of control. As August 11 turned



to August 12, crowds gathered throughout South Central, concentrating on 103rd Street, which came to be known as Charcoal Alley. Rumors circulated that young blacks were boasting that “they were going to show the cops that night.”<sup>37</sup>

Hoping to stop the violence, leaders from the African American community met with young participants at Athens Park on August 12. Organized by the Human Relations Commission’s John Buggs, the meeting of over 200 people was attended by Reverend H. H. Brookins, Congressman Augustus Hawkins, NAACP leader Claude Hudson, and County Board of Supervisors members John Gibson and Kenneth Hahn. Despite constructive proposals, many active in the uprising believed that television outlets fanned the flames of the violence and did not show the constructive elements of the meeting. Media coverage undermined peace efforts by focusing on a black youth who exclaimed that they were “not going to fight down here no more. You know where they going? They after the whites.”<sup>38</sup>

Buggs worked with youth leaders to address their grievances to stop the unrest. In one meeting the youth felt that the violence would stop if “the Anglo cops” were not in the area. The problem, according to one kid, was that many of them had been arrested on the first day and “had come back to the Watts area with bloody heads” and “believed that the PD [police department] had roughed them up.” Confrontation with the police gave many youth a sense of pride and justice for years of harassment and brutality. “Residents in Watts had a feeling that they had given the police a licking and that they were not going to let the police forget it,” Buggs recalled. “They were going to impress it on the police more.” Recommendations to restore peace aimed at removing white officers and bringing in black officers in plainclothes and employing residents as a community police force. As Brookins summarized, “There ought not to be any concentration of police power in this community tonight.”<sup>39</sup>

Buggs relayed the proposals for reduced police power to the LAPD’s community relations officer, James Fisk. When asked if the LAPD would accept the recommendations to remove white officers, Fisk sorrowfully replied, “No.” Fisk reported that the LAPD would maintain “regular” patrols but did not know if they would include black officers. When Fisk reported to Parker, the chief responded, “Certainly we do not wish to be provocateurs by being in the area,” but Parker would not remove police from the area because officers at the meeting “did not believe they could abdicate their responsibility to uphold law and order.” The lack of awareness by Parker and LAPD officials of the antipolice sentiment fueling the unrest caused Buggs to exclaim to Fisk, “You’ve blown it.”<sup>40</sup>

Police officials responded with an overwhelming show of force. When six police cars moved into the area near Athens Park with sirens blazing, “it was just like an explosion,” Brookins reported; “everything just went haywire.” Police cars filled with white officers flooded the streets. As Buggs and Brookins drove through a crew of black youngsters followed by a police car, the youth waited for the pair to pass before pelting police cars with rocks and slabs of concrete. Nearby, “two or three Negroes were backed up against a wall, and all the officers had batons in their hands.” The LAPD had responded with overwhelming force, causing Buggs to comment, “Man, it looks like they’re [the police] asking for it.”<sup>41</sup>

When Buggs and Brookins met with Deputy Chief Roger Murdock at the 77th Street Station later that night, they described the simmering tension. Suggesting that white police officers were the target of the community’s anger, they pushed for the use of black officers in plainclothes. Murdock responded that the black leadership’s suggestions had failed—“Now let us do it our own way.” Upon leaving the station, Brookins told reporters, “The Police Department indicated to us that they were going to run the city their own way, and they would prove who runs the city of Los Angeles. Mr. Roger Murdock’s attitude was one I would suspect from a Jim Clark in Alabama. We are not in Alabama, we want to work with the police, we want to work with elected officials, not against them.”<sup>42</sup> The department’s plan aimed to show the rioters who ruled the streets and primed the city for more violence.

Mired by communication problems, a shortage of vehicles, manpower shortages, inadequate jail facilities, poor field equipment, and a lack of leadership from Parker, the LAPD quickly became overwhelmed by the unrest as the city spiraled out of control. Participants in the unrest attacked cars driven by whites, forced white reporters out of the area, threw objects at firefighters, made Molotov cocktails, and burned buildings. Looting targeted white business owners as crowds, combining to totals of tens of thousands, shouted “Burn, Baby, Burn.” Participants did not shy away from confrontations with the symbols of authority, sniping at LAPD officers from rooftops and behind buildings. “The police, sheriffs and highway patrolman,” Leonard Carter of the NAACP reported, “were barraged with bricks, bottles, etc. and were overrun during the night.”<sup>43</sup>

Although Parker had prepared for unrest after the 1964 Harlem riot, his response was uncoordinated and self-defeating. Parker refused to meet with civil rights leaders to cool tensions, calling participants “agitators” and criminals, while Mayor Sam Yorty would not consult with black leaders because he saw them as “part of the problem.” City leaders failed to recognize that the violence was the symptom of a long history of discrimination, abuse, and

segregation. Instead of attempting to understand the discontent aimed at his department, Parker dismissed the rioters by suggesting, "One person threw a rock. . . . Then, like monkeys in a zoo, others started throwing rocks."<sup>44</sup>

Sensational helicopter coverage amplified police power by bringing images of urban warfare into people's homes. Jerry Dunphy, a KNXT television news anchor, introduced "The Big News" on August 13, by linking the war in Vietnam to the streets of South Central, claiming, "Newsmen who have been in Vietnam say nothing they have seen elsewhere compares with the unbridled rampaging in Watts." The KTLA television report "Hell in the City of Angels," produced days after the uprising, described the unrest using metaphors of war that pitted the forces of law and order against undifferentiated black masses.<sup>45</sup> The LAPD legitimized views that such spaces were enemy war zones filled with criminals that required aggressive, military-style policing. Law-and-order policies were presented as the only logical response to a situation that Parker described as "very much like fighting the Viet Cong."<sup>46</sup>

After three days, the outmanned and ill-prepared LAPD received reinforcements from the California National Guard. Lieutenant Governor Glenn Anderson called the scene an "extreme emergency," placing a curfew over a 46.5-square-mile area.<sup>47</sup> As one reporter stated, "Sunday saw . . . the balance of power [shift back to the authorities]. . . . Finally we had that overwhelming use of force." As Deputy Chief Daryl Gates described it, "We're taking the gloves off." Anyone outside after 8:00 P.M. was subject to arrest, and white guardsmen and police officers flooded the area and tanks rolled down the streets, creating what resident Robert Oliver recalled as a "little gestapo situation." Mayor Yorty, observing from a helicopter, commented, "It must make those policemen feel pretty good to have those troops behind them. . . . That's the kind of force we've got to have." With the aid of the National Guard, police flushed out snipers, forcing them to lie prone on the street, and yelled at suspected rioters, "One more move and I'll kill ya." An improvised traffic sign on 104th Street and Wilmington warned, "Turn left or get shot."<sup>48</sup>

Years of oppressive policing had created a police state. "If you wanted to stay alive then you pretty much kinda got in line," Oliver explained. "It turned into a police state. . . . They were very serious about what they felt had to be done in order to put these black people back in their places."<sup>49</sup> If black residents viewed the use of force as an instrument of containment, for the state, force was necessary to quell the violence and maintain social control.<sup>50</sup> Believing his officers had turned the tide, Parker reported, "We're on top and they're on the bottom." He praised his officers in responding with high standards and quality performance. Officers, Parker concluded, "demonstrated skill,



Handmade sign in the street, “Turn left or get shot,” in front of police barricade, 1965. Reminding residents in South Central who owned the streets, the LAPD doubled down on the threat of force and monopoly of violence in response to the antipolice protest. The LAPD viewed the streets of Los Angeles as a battleground requiring containment and control. Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots Records, BANC MSS 74/115 c; courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

adaptability, courage, sense of responsibility and professional conduct [that] reflects the quality of our department and our unreserved dedication to the public service.”<sup>51</sup>

Mass arrests were a deliberate strategy of incapacitation. As Murdock explained, the way to handle the rioters was “to put as many people as we can in jail. . . . That’s certainly no secret.”<sup>52</sup> Police arrested 3,952 people, including over 500 youths under the age of eighteen, for any number of offenses including “loitering, looting, and vandalism.” When responding to claims that innocent people had been swept up in the mass arrests, city attorney Roger Arnebergh commented, “I doubt that innocent people were swept up. . . . Police did not make arrests indiscriminately.” Many of those arrested for burglary or curfew violations, however, stated in interviews afterward that they had not been involved in violence or looting.<sup>53</sup>

In the following weeks, arrest cases overwhelmed local courts. Judges supported the police by setting bail as high as \$5,000. The United Civil Rights



Police officers search suspects in Watts, 1965. Stop, search, and mass arrests targeting young African Americans were at the center of police strategy to address the Watts uprising. Such tactics built on the LAPD's approach to policing after World War II and the targeting and criminalization of the city's African American residents. *Los Angeles Times* Photographic Archives (Collection 1429); courtesy of Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

Committee and NAACP offered free legal advice and services, but it was nowhere near enough. The NAACP later filed suit in the California Supreme Court charging twenty-one judges with failure to appoint counsel and to inform arrestees of the charges filed against them. Contrary to claims of prosecutors, many had no prior arrests or convictions. A study of those arrested by the McCone Commission found that 1,232 (35.8 percent) of adults arrested had no prior criminal record and another 930 (27 percent) had one or two convictions resulting in sentences of 90 days or less. Summary justice ensued as cases went forward without juries and judges handed down verdicts of one year to life for looting.<sup>54</sup>





Police officer threatens an African American youth with a shotgun, 1965. The threat of force and militarized response to Watts foreshadowed the police demand for more resources, hardware, and authority in its aftermath. *Los Angeles Times* Photographic Archives (Collection 1429); courtesy of Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

By August 17, 103rd Street was barely more than rubble. What most newspapers called “mob rule” had ended and Governor Brown remarked, “We must and will continue to deal forcefully with the terrorists until Los Angeles is safe again.”<sup>55</sup> It took 934 LAPD officers, 719 sheriff’s deputies, and 13,900 California National Guardsmen to put down the uprising. Property damage amounted to roughly \$40 million. The death toll reached at least thirty-four, and 1,032 were wounded. In the following weeks, the coroner’s inquest found twenty-six of the deaths to be justifiable homicide. Attempts by Hugh Manes to question officers at the inquest were dismissed, and he was ejected from the courtroom.<sup>56</sup>

Retaliatory actions by LAPD officers confirmed the department’s reliance on force and racially targeted policing to reassert police power and en-



U.S. Army troops after the Watts uprising, 1965. Troops of the U.S. Army's 1st Battalion, 160th Infantry leaving after Watts. The use of military troops to reinforce the LAPD during the Watts uprising blurred the lines between the police power and military power. *Los Angeles Times* Photographic Archives (Collection 1429); courtesy of Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

force social order. Perhaps the most revealing counteroffensive occurred at the Nation of Islam Mosque Number 27, where police had attacked three years earlier. On the morning of August 18, LAPD officers with the support of sheriffs, highway patrol, and National Guard troops attacked the Nation of Islam mosque after an anonymous 1:43 A.M. phone call reporting that “male Negroes were carrying guns into a building at 5606 South Broadway.” With guardsmen securing the surrounding area, LAPD officers invaded the mosque, firing more than 500 rounds into the building in response to alleged gunshots. Nineteen men inside and an additional forty outside the temple were arrested and led away at gunpoint. No guns or bullet casings were found in the mosque. Most suggestive of the LAPD’s retaliatory intent



in assaulting the Mosque occurred after the raid when one officer involved posed for a photograph with a “trophy” pin of Elijah Muhammad’s picture, the Nation’s leader, pinned to his uniform. While the police commission attempted to downplay the incident to protect the department’s image, Councilman Billy Mills pressured the Police, Fire, and Civil Defense Committee to undertake an in-depth investigation of the incident. The committee’s report found the law enforcement actions an “unwarranted, unjustified, and irresponsible use of Police power.”<sup>57</sup>

Many white residents approved of the use of force to quell the uprising. In the weeks after the uprising, the Chamber of Commerce praised Parker, and he received at least 17,864 letters, of which 99.3 percent were positive.<sup>58</sup> As one constituent wrote to County Board of Supervisors member Kenneth Hahn, “We wish Chief Parker could have more police to cope with his problem—we are for him 100%,” while another commented that Parker “has been attacked by undisciplined elements.” Others laid blame directly on the black participants, whom they vilified as subversives and criminals. “It’s these *hoodlums* standing around waiting,” one resident wrote to Assistant Governor Glenn Anderson, “*these are criminals* out for disregard for *Authority*.”<sup>59</sup>

The violence had the potential to raise the veil that hid repressive policing from mainstream society. But, as Hugh Manes explained, the response of city officials and whites served to avoid a reckoning with the culpability of the police and the state in producing the uprising. By ruling all the deaths “JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE,” the blame rested on lawless rioters, and “the community is relieved; the police are exonerated; and justice is done.” Most whites willingly accepted this dominant narrative. Those who chose to consider the source of the unrest, however, could not dismiss the uprising as senseless violence but a response of “a community oppressed by bigoted symbols of white authority whose concept of law enforcement is force.”<sup>60</sup> For residents, forcing the attention of the white power structure on a community so often deemed unimportant was the ultimate victory of the uprising. “We won,” one resident boasted, “because we made the whole world pay attention to us. The police chief never came here before; the mayor always stayed uptown. We made them come.”<sup>61</sup>

## The Meaning of Watts

Governor Edmund “Pat” Brown organized the Governor’s Commission to Investigate the Los Angeles Riots on August 19, 1965, appointing John McCone to chair the committee. McCone was a conservative with an “impeccable” reputation in the business community who brought a set of ide-

ological blinders to his work that ensured the final report would deemphasize the problems of police brutality that led to the uprising. In his directive to the commission, Brown stated that the violence was a “senseless, formless riot—not a civil rights demonstration.” Brown also targeted emergency anti-poverty programs for the riot-torn areas, but referred to those involved in the unrest as “hoodlums” and criminals.<sup>62</sup> By framing the rebellion as lawless and criminal at the outset, Brown shaped the commission’s approach to solving the police department’s legitimacy crisis by absolving it of blame. As one editorial described the commission, “Let’s understand one thing. The people now on trial are the rioters, not the police department.”<sup>63</sup>

But meetings between state representatives, federal officials, and residents held in the weeks after the uprising revealed bitterness toward the police. One observer reported on a community meeting where most residents “agreed that Police Chief Parker and the police force constituted a provocative force in the general unrest which erupted into a riot.”<sup>64</sup> Meetings with black teenagers exposed the dual problem of police brutality and lack of police service that fueled disillusionment and discontent. The teens repeatedly explained that the police motto was To Protect and to Serve and that officers should be respected if they did so but “the police did not protect or serve them or their neighborhood” and routinely failed to “respect people and to respect law and order.” As the teens suggested, avoiding violence required eliminating the cause of poor police-community relations: the racist practices of the police. While the community had little faith in the willingness of officials to take on Parker and the LAPD, they were waiting to “see what the Man will do.”<sup>65</sup>

The unrest represented a rejection of the way the police operated in the black community. As Watts resident Stan Sanders made clear, the police were targeted because “he comes to the Negro community to impose a legal order so incompatible with its style of life and patterns of conduct as to make it seem that he is imposing an alien civil code.” For many the uprising was not senseless violence but a logical demand to be free of state-sanctioned violence and a criminal justice system aimed at keeping blacks in their place. “It’s Parker and his police,” one twenty-seven-year-old dockworker commented on the cause. “Sure everybody down here’s got a record. A Negro can’t stay here a year without a record. They want Negroes to have records. Then we can’t get those civil-service jobs.”<sup>66</sup> The uprising was a calculated political protest against the use of the police to enforce the boundaries of race and social order. “It was a war to break the authority of the police,” Wendell Collins of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) testified, because the police aimed “to accustom him [blacks] to live in an inferior position in society.”<sup>67</sup>

The uprising could only be understood in the context of a long history of poor police-community relations. Multiple reports pointed to Parker’s refusal

to meet with leaders or residents to discuss ways to improve police-community relations as a central cause of the uprising and potential future violence. In a meeting between clergy and Parker facilitated by the McCone Commission, for example, Reverend Joseph Hardwick explained how divides in the community remained and “Parker’s words are just adding fuel to the fire. Parker is just as responsible for this riot as anyone.”<sup>68</sup> If resentment of the police served as a spark to the uprising, the actions of law enforcement also fueled the violence. “Law enforcement methods played a significant role in the recent disorders,” Congressman Augustus Hawkins testified, “serving as the catalyst that set off the rioting and was prevalent as a force that sustained the drive for days.” Hawkins implored the commission to consider the role of the police in contributing to the uprising to prevent possible future violence. “Are we safer by ignoring or recognizing the human factor we have described?” he questioned. “That, in the final analysis, is going to be the test of law enforcement unless we intend to have the National Guard on a stand-by basis.”<sup>69</sup>

While attention focused on the African American community and involvement in the uprising, Mexican Americans not only played a role during the uprising but also mirrored the concerns with racially targeted police power and demands for law and order. The Mexican American newsletter *Carta Editorial* condemned the police handling of the Frye incident, blaming the police for responding “in the only manner they seem to know how to respond—with more insults and violence.” As protests expanded, the “tempo of police violence continued to increase.” Rather than a riot, *Carta Editorial* called the unrest a “revolt against all laws, authority, and accepted social norms.” It was not limited to African Americans but “combined with many of the Mexican-Americans in the area against the symbols of authority such as the police.” Mexican American organizations, such as Community Service Organization and East Los Angeles Community Relations Council, demanded investigation into allegations of brutality.<sup>70</sup>

As with African Americans, testimony from Mexican Americans argued that the need for change rested not with residents but with the police. Even as he acknowledged that police-community relations were better than in the 1950s, Ralph Guzman of UCLA’s Mexican American Study Project told the McCone Commission that there was considerable room for improvement. He also suggested that minority groups did not riot for the sake of rioting or due to deficient behavior and criminal tendencies but as a direct reaction to discrimination, segregation, and repression imposed by the police and white society more broadly. Congressman Ed Roybal, who had been a city council member representing East Los Angeles, also suggested the long-standing problem of police brutality in the Mexican American community, which

contributed to fear of the police and distrust of law enforcement more generally.<sup>71</sup>

Liberal officials saw the Watts uprising as an opportunity to wrest power away from the police department. Tom Bradley and other African American councilmen, Billy Mills and Gilbert Lindsay, called for increased civilian oversight of the police department. Yet the commission often came to the defense of the department and Chief Parker, who was often on the defensive. During the investigation, Bradley and Parker repeatedly faced off. After questioning from Bradley about the role of the police in provoking the violence, Parker jabbed back, claiming, "Councilman Bradley has been tremendously critical of my department before the riots and he is continuing to be."<sup>72</sup>

Parker denied any and all criticism aimed at his department, quipping that he was "the only police chief that they ever sacked a whole city to get rid of." Speaking to *Meet the Press* on August 29, he suggested his "sacking" remark was "facetious" and "I am sure they didn't burn Los Angeles because of Parker." Citing the widespread support from white residents for his handling of the uprising, Parker claimed the security of the city would be at risk if he left office. When asked if his department was at least partially to blame for the violence due to abusive practices, he gave no ground, saying, "I would have to conclude that we are not responsible for triggering the riot."<sup>73</sup> Compared with the California Highway Patrol, Parker stated in his testimony, his highly disciplined, upstanding officers, in contrast, "have been able to continue to apply law enforcement in the area without retributive violence." When the department issued its own account of the riot in its 1965 annual report, in contrast, it praised officers' "remarkable restraint" while enduring "felonious assault upon their persons."<sup>74</sup>

Law enforcement, political officials, and media outlets routinely rejected claims of police brutality as attacks on the police. Indicative of how marginalized black and Mexican American people were in comparison with the power of the police, Parker repeatedly dismissed charges of police brutality by arguing that they were merely the work of subversives "designed sort of to deaden the police and drive them into a sense of inactivity."<sup>75</sup> Yorty came to Parker's defense, calling the charges of brutality false. Criticism of the police, he argued, undermined faith in the police and public safety. Parker denounced the charges as a "terribly vicious canard which is used to conceal Negro criminality . . . to try to find someone else to blame for their crimes."<sup>76</sup> Deputy Chief Richard Simon explained that cries of police brutality created a hostile attitude that made "the task of law enforcement extremely difficult." And even the testimony from police officers that did acknowledge instances of brutality dismissed them as an individual officer's problem rather than a systemic issue.<sup>77</sup>

The McCone Commission's analysis gave little weight to such testimony.<sup>78</sup> As McCone told the Urban League's Wesley Brazier about the commission's efforts to uncover the role police abuse played in the uprising, "We are having considerable difficulty getting to the bottom of it."<sup>79</sup> McCone believed that the claims of police brutality were overblown and represented a threat to democratic governance. "There's a lot of evidence that it's a two-way street," McCone argued, "that there's a kind of planned aggravation of the police by the Negroes." Brushing aside demands for an in-depth analysis of police brutality, McCone described criticism of the police as a "device that is designed to destroy the law—and after all, law is just the thin thread that holds our society together."<sup>80</sup>

Official accounts portrayed those who participated in the unrest as criminals and hoodlums who did not represent the true feelings of the black community. Yorty believed that Los Angeles's image had been tainted by a small number of radical activists, Communists, and other "subversives" who did not represent the feelings of the black community or reflect what he saw as Los Angeles's upstanding race relations. "We cannot permit a criminal element to destroy the exemplary race relations which must continue to exist in our city," Yorty explained.<sup>81</sup> Backed up by similar testimony from police commissioner John Ferraro, Parker suggested the participants in the unrest had no legitimate grievances, claiming, "We don't have any civil-rights problems here."<sup>82</sup>

Yet the uprising had more support than the McCone Commission suggested. Subsequent studies found that anywhere from 30,000 to 80,000 African American residents participated and that perhaps over 70,000 "close spectators" observed the rebellion, a substantially higher number than the 10,000 active participants outlined by the McCone report. Sympathy for the participants was also more widespread than McCone allowed. As one middle-class black woman and owner of an art gallery testified, "I will not take a Molotov cocktail but I am as mad as they [riot participants] are." Not only did more African American residents participate than Yorty, Parker, McCone, or the average white resident cared to admit, but many of those who were involved could hardly be labeled hoodlums, "violent criminals, or recent migrants. One study found that the average convicted rioter was a black man who had lived in Los Angeles for more than five years, was a high school dropout, was employed as either a domestic or an unskilled laborer, earned between \$200 and \$400 a month, and had an arrest record."<sup>83</sup>

The reliance on what would come to be known as the riff-raff theory, however, delegitimized black grievances, reinforced beliefs in black criminality, and allowed the commission to absolve city officials and law enforcement of any responsibility for the violence. It also rationalized enhanced policing and

punitive crime control policies. The commission's report recommended police reform, but its underlying logic reinforced prevailing views that defended the police and their expansive authority to prevent, contain, and eliminate potential threats to order.<sup>84</sup>

### An End or a Beginning?

The McCone Commission released its report, *Violence in the City: An End or a Beginning?*, after one hundred days of testimony and data collection. The ninety-six-page report began with an outline of the chronology of the nearly seven days of unrest. Although police action was a central grievance and source of the discontent, the McCone Report stopped well short of placing responsibility on the LAPD for the uprising. If anyone was to blame for the violence, the commission concluded, it was not the police but the rioters. "However powerful their grievances," the report admonished, "the rioters had no legal or moral justification for the wounds they inflicted. Many crimes, a great many felonies, were committed. Even more dismaying, as we studied the record, was the large number of brutal exhortations to violence which were uttered by some Negroes."<sup>85</sup> The commission sidestepped any serious reckoning with the historical context of repressive policing and harassment highlighted in the testimony it had collected. "The commission was not set up to investigate the police department," one commissioner admitted. "What caused the commission to come into existence? The Riots. Not the police department."<sup>86</sup>

The chronology that began the report betrayed the commission's biases. Rather than viewing the initial spark to the riot—the beating and arrest of the Fries—as evidence of poor relations between the police and the black community, the report stated "Considering the undisputed facts, the commission finds that the arrest of the Fries was handled efficiently and expeditiously." Subsequent actions by the police to arrest a bystander who spit at them went unquestioned, and blame centered on "inflated and distorted rumors concerning the arrests." When it described the efforts of the Human Relations Commission, clergy, and youth to stop the violence at the August 12 Athens Park meeting, the report merely said the effort "misfired." Little to no credence was given to the warnings from Buggs, Brookins, or black youth that continued police presence would only add to the rebellion. The McCone Report omitted the vast piles of evidence that the police only added to discontent.<sup>87</sup>

Ignoring testimony demonstrating deep-rooted distrust of the police and Chief Parker personally, the commission defended Parker from criticism. *Violence in the City* concluded that "Chief Parker's statements to us and collateral evidence such as his record of fairness to Negro officers are inconsistent

with his having such an attitude” of discrimination against black residents. The report went so far as to conclude that Parker was a “capable Chief who directs an efficient police force that serves well this entire community.”<sup>88</sup>

By viewing the unrest as an expression of criminality carried out by a lawless element, the report denied the need for systemic changes in policing. Rather than addressing the deep-seated patterns of harassment and authoritarian policing in neighborhoods of color, the report defended the role of the police in maintaining order. “If police authority is destroyed all of society will suffer because groups would feel free to disobey the law and inevitably their number would increase,” the report explained. “Chaos might easily result.”<sup>89</sup>

*Violence in the City* outlined four areas of police reform. These included a stronger Board of Police Commissioners, an inspector general to handle complaints, enhanced cooperation between the community and the police, and new hiring practices to diversify the department. Yet the burden of change rested largely on transforming African American and Mexican American attitudes toward the police rather than changing the police department itself. Rejecting a civilian review board, the report barely acknowledged the existence of dual standards, excessive force, and discriminatory policing practices in black and Mexican American neighborhoods. Systemic problems in the ways the police approached relations with black and Mexican American residents were left largely unaddressed.<sup>90</sup>

The reception of the report was largely negative. Many commentators viewed the report as an opportunity to address grievances but held that it “prescribes aspirin where surgery is required.” Even *Newsweek* recognized that the “commission scarcely comes to grips at all with the incendiary issue that finally lit the fire in the streets of Watts: the widespread Negro allegations of police misbehavior ranging from name-calling to outright brutality,” and was shocked that the LAPD “got a virtually clean bill from McCone & Co.”<sup>91</sup> Groups such as the California Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the American Civil Liberties Union, and United Civil Rights Committee criticized the report’s “modest measures” and pushed for more rigorous solutions to police-community relations. In an exercise of “reverse logic,” the McCone Commission called for an end to criticism of Parker while criticizing those who protest injustice rather than “those whose acts give rise to the criticism.” The McCone Commission had whitewashed Chief Parker and the department’s actions more broadly.<sup>92</sup>

Most importantly, the report failed to consider how routine contact with law enforcement in the black community had created a fear of repression that led communities to seek the expulsion of the police. Bayard Rustin, longtime civil rights activist and advisor to Martin Luther King Jr., suggested that the report fundamentally missed the point of the “Watts Manifesto.” By framing



the rebellion as the “random work of a ‘criminal element,’” Rustin argued, Parker’s attitude—and the McCone Commission’s inaction—could lead, as Martin Luther King phrased it in a meeting with Rustin and Parker, “into potential holocaust.”<sup>93</sup> Black residents and activists hoped that the crisis produced by the Watts uprising would lead to reforms ushering in equitable policing. Their vision, however, was undermined by the McCone Report’s deference to police and support for law and order.

Relying on the belief that the riot was caused by a lawless criminal element in the black community, *Violence in the City* ensured that any recommended changes in police complaint procedures would occur slowly. While the LAPD complied with the McCone Commission’s basic recommendations focused on developing a community relations program, appointing an inspector to oversee disciplinary practice, and efforts to diversify the officer corps, as the American Civil Liberties Union found a year after Watts, “*No significant reform of the system has resulted.*”<sup>94</sup>

---

The Watts moment focused attention on the long-standing problem of racist police power. The police had been central to sparking the uprising and pushing it forward. “In the riot of 1965, I think it was jus[t] the idea of a policeman, period,” resident Paul Williams recalled in a 1969 interview. “I don’t think it mattered if it was HP [highway patrol] or Sheriff or what. Anyone with a uniform on.”<sup>95</sup> The uprising also provided residents with a sense of power and pride vis-à-vis the police. “Even if the people got nothing else out of it they can always say, ‘We beat the L.A.P.D., beat them to the ground,’” one young resident proclaimed. “They had to call in the National Guard to stop us.”<sup>96</sup>

Instead of interrogating the depth of police repression that structured relations between law enforcement and the black and Mexican American communities, the McCone Commission doubled down on police-oriented responses. By ignoring the patterns of daily interactions between the police and African American residents that produced such distrust of the police and made law enforcement a symbol of oppression, however, the McCone Commission also enabled the expansion of police power in the aftermath of the Watts uprising. It was part of an emerging national shift toward militarization and get-tough policing.

Law enforcement officials in Los Angeles and across the country capitalized on the dominant framing of the lawless rioter to rebuild and expand the capacity of the police to maintain order in the streets. Police-community relations remained tense. Indeed, the memory of the uprising and the crisis of legitimacy it produced shaped the way LAPD officers policed the areas of

“foreign territory” in the following years. “Don’t think the LAPD haven’t forgotten the 1965 revolt because this is the only thing I hear when I go back to the pen every time—all about the revolt,” Watts resident Sedgie Collins reported in 1969. “There always talking that talk up in 77. That’s all you hear.”<sup>97</sup> Rather than reducing tension between the police and residents of color, the response by police and city officials to the Watts uprising emphasized law and order and intensified militarized policing as a program of revenge that ensured daily contact between the criminal justice system and black and brown residents.

The election of Ronald Reagan as governor of California in 1966 and Richard Nixon to the presidency in 1968 provided a political context conducive to intensifying police power even further. The outburst of urban uprisings in cities across the country in 1967 and 1968 fueled fears of lawlessness. Drawing from this national context as well as the local preoccupation with preventing another Watts, law enforcement and city officials would work to enhance the power of the police through militarization while also attempting to gain buy-in from residents by deploying a more responsive community relations programs. The result would be a new form of policing intent on winning the battle for the streets through a strategy of counterinsurgency.