

# NEW JERSEY AND THE NEAR COLLAPSE OF CIVIC CULTURE: REFLECTIONS ON THE SUMMER OF 1967

BY CLEMENT PRICE

RESEARCH ESSAY

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It was a summer unlike any before or since. There were 164 civil disorders in 128 American cities. In the larger theaters of civil unrest, Detroit and Newark, entire neighborhoods were left in physical ruin. Over the years that were to follow, “the riots” became synonymous with some if not all of the towns and cities where violence, property destruction and death intersected.

New Jersey was arguably the most adversely affected state by that summer. In Newark, the state’s largest and most important city, 26 citizens died and more than \$10 million in property damage. In the bucolic suburb of Plainfield a white police officer was stomped to death by a mob of blacks. Englewood, another affluent town in one of America’s wealthiest counties, also had troubles that summer, along with East Orange, Jersey City and Camden.

How could such calamities happen here in one of the nation’s wealthiest states? Why then, during what the hippies called the summer of peace? And what are we to make of New Jersey’s summer of discontent on the eve of its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

By 1967, New Jersey had routinely committed every mistake imaginable in matters civic, social, and political. Newark, it’s largest city, was well on its way to becoming a warehouse for the poor, as high rise public housing competed with crumbling 19<sup>th</sup> century tenements that early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish and Italian immigrants once found offensive. The City’s government was notoriously corrupt and corrupt in the worst possible way—discriminatively corrupt. It was also notoriously insensitive to new demographic realities—the transformation of a white ethnic city into a city of blacks and browns. Newark’s major corporations were in but hardly of the city. Police relations with the black community were infamous. Indeed, it has often been said that the riots started because of a rumor that a black cab driver, John Smith, had been beaten to death by two white cops. Untrue, but the beating of black citizens by white cops, as the civic luminary Gus Heningburg recently observed, was all but a ritual in late 1960s Newark.

The troubles that intersected with the infamous arrest and alleged beating of John Smith by two white ethnic police officers occurred at a uniquely tense time in Newark’s history. The city’s Golden Era had long passed, surviving only as sentimental memories of a vibrant downtown, of ethnic villages that enabled the sons and daughters of European immigrants to climb into the American mainstream, and of an urban infrastructure that was comparable to a small New York City. Newark had once been the Master City. It was no longer.

The most telling symptom of a civic realm about to unravel was the way political leaders dealt with a plan to bring a medical school and hospital to Newark—the University of Medicine and Dentistry. All but ignoring the power of place and the power of memory and history, city officials were prepared to bulldoze 150 acres of land in Newark’s central ward to make way for the new complex. It was a perceived nightmare, seemingly about to happen. It appeared to be the worse scenario—the loss of one’s home, the end of an historic ethnic community that had

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ushered Germans, and east European Jews, and more recently southern born blacks into modern America society.

The widespread fear of the lost of home and hearth, the intergenerational black impoverishment that had, by the mid-1960s, become a national disgrace, the ritual of police misconduct in the black community, and the overarching decline of urban life in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century set the stage for what Newarkers and New Jersey residents generally witnessed during the summer of 1967.

What was witnessed that summer is still contested. Were the disturbances in Newark and other towns' riots? Were they rebellions? Where they civil disorders? Were the days of violence in Newark pogroms, given the large number of Jewish businesses that were looted and burned?

As in previous commemorative observances, these questions will bring answers of a sort. Because we are now more than a generation removed from 1967, I think the answers to these questions will be blessedly modified by scholarship and the retrospective distance that 40 years can give.

An important perspective on that distant period and perhaps on what has occurred in New Jersey since can be found in the New Jersey Governor's Select Commission on Civic Disorders *Report for Action*, which was released in February 1968. The *Report* gave a litany of prescriptions for a better Newark:

*"The fate of a city is in the hands of the policeman on the beat, the landlord of a tenement building, the shop steward in the factory, the employer, the storekeeper, the social worker, the public employee behind his desk or the neighbor who will not be a neighbor.*

*We need fewer promises and more action from political leaders and government officials.*

*We need fewer press releases from police commissioners on community relations and more respect by patrolmen for the dignity of each citizen.*

*We need fewer speeches from employers and union leaders on equal opportunity in the future, and more flexible hiring standards now.*

*We need more principals, teachers and guidance counselors who want their students to succeed instead of expecting them to fail.*

*We need more social workers who respect and foster a client's pride instead of treating him as an irritant or a child.*

*Suburban residents must understand that the future of their communities is inextricably linked to the fate of the city, instead of harboring the illusion that they can maintain invisible walls or continue to run away.*

*Such a change is possible only when the people of our more fortunate communities understand that what is required of them is not an act of generosity toward the people in the ghettos, but a decision of direct and deep self-interest."*

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Contemporary New Jersey residents have inherited the at once stark and gleaming legacies of New Jersey's summer of discontent. Stark in the sense that New Jersey remains a racially Balkanized commonwealth. Our schools, our neighborhoods, our private lives are still largely segregated. While we would not want an alternative to this reality to be imposed on us, many of us fear that such a social reality will forever imperil the quality of our way of life, that it will forever sustain old mythologies, old issues.

And yet there are indeed gleaming legacies of 1967. Newark and other New Jersey communities that bore witness to that summer have recovered much of their civic spirit. While race is still an issue facing New Jersey, many of us are aware of the troubles wrought by racism. And if commemoration is necessary before a community can move beyond the harsh realities of its past, then this 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Jersey's summer of discontent will mark a confident look into the future.

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At a meeting several weeks ago hosted by the New Jersey Historical Society, I learned that the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of Newark's troubles will coincide with the second night of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's hugely popular "Sounds of the City" series. Over the years twenty and thirty something citizens assembly there to do what young people love to do: watch other young people! I thought to myself, how might NJPAC, that huge public space that now symbolizes the New Newark, at once commemorate the summer of 1967 and still have a party? I thought about the delicate juxtaposition of memory, history, and the present and suggested that NJPAC learn from the past, that it have a reading of the names of those who lost their lives during Newark's summer of discontent, that there be a moment of silence, and that the festivities begin with the great R&B anthem by Martha & The Vandellas—"Dancing in the Streets."

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