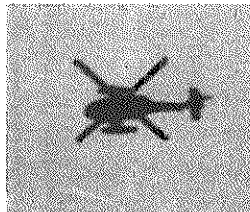


# L.A. was not a "Riot"

By Bill Gallegos  
—Los Angeles

The blazing neighborhoods which lit up the skies of Los Angeles following the verdict in the Rodney King case were a furious reflection of the "new world order" in American society. The uprising tore the U.S. social fabric tattered by the Reagan-Bush era. When troops were brought in to suppress the uprising (it's only a "riot" if you think it was like a soccer game or rock and roll concert), the toll stood at over 60 dead, nearly 16,000 people arrested, more than 1300 structures burned, and almost \$800 million in damage.



The immediate cause of rebellion was the verdict acquitting all four police officers who had beaten and tortured African-American Rodney King. The verdict, delivered by a jury with no African-Americans, before a white judge in a nearly all-white suburb sent an accurate message to the Black community: it's open season on the African-Americans. Not even documented evidence of mass police abuse is enough to protect an African-American in Los Angeles. If African-Americans could find no justice in the courts, they were determined to get it in the streets.



Neighbors helped neighbors by organizing cleanup in the aftermath of the rebellion.



Destruction on Walnut Street, South Central Los Angeles. (Moving Forward photos: Cynthia Ruiz)

### "Getting even"

A year before the uprising, rappers knew the people wanted justice badly. In Ice T's rap "Cop Killer," performed in response to Rodney King's beating last year, he echoed the sentiment on the street for "getting even" with the system. Upon the denial of justice with the infamous verdict, people looted and destroyed in just such an attempt to get even with the cops and the racist system of injustice. This was not the "senseless violence" that both conservative and liberal politicians decry, but a perfectly understandable consequence of the system of racial and class oppression.

### What caused the uprising?

The L.A. rebellion was really a revolt of the African-American and Latino working class. The arson, looting and violence represented a spontaneous assault against a system which allows one percent of the U.S. population to control ninety percent of the wealth, while Black and Brown communities suffer epidemic unemployment and poverty or grind it out in dead-end, sub-minimum wage jobs.

L.A.'s African-American and Latino immigrant communities looked like war zones before the uprising, scarred by homelessness and substandard housing, decaying schools, and a criminal lack of basic health services, social programs, recreational facilities and the other "amenities" of Bush's domestic new world order. Desperation created the gang and drug epidemics in those communities. Many of the Black and Latino communities consider the drug problem to be nothing less than chemical warfare waged by the federal government which assisted drug smuggling as part of it's Contra war against Nicaragua. On top of

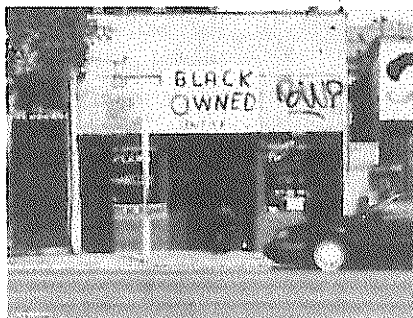
this mess of social problems is the police apparatus, whose principal function in communities of color has been to terrorize and repress, to control the discontent which erupted with explosive force after the King verdict.

### *Who will shape the new world order?*

The African-American community, with considerable help from poor Latinos, has forced the real social issues facing Americans directly onto the table. For the time being at least, we will hear little about congressional check kiting, Bill Clinton's latest scandal, or Dan Quayle's dope smoking. L.A.'s fires have etched new priorities onto the cynical body politic. Those issues are jobs, schools, health care, housing, police accountability, and the self-determination of America's people of color.

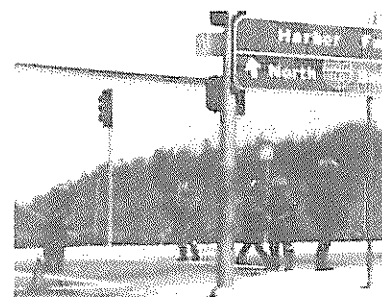
If the rebellion pointed up anything at all, it is the total impotence of the nation's "leaders." Politicians from George Bush to Tom Bradley to Bill Clinton stood by helplessly as their "constituents" failed to heed their frantic pleas for calm and acceptance of the verdict. While the African-American middle class gathered for prayer and song, its poor were making the only form of protest which this nation seems to take seriously.

It is an unfortunate reflection of our times that although the L.A. rebellion, which has finally focused America's attention where it needs to be, was made by the poor, its aftermath is being controlled by the more privileged. It was the defiant actions of the Black and Brown "underclass" which compelled George Bush to allocate \$600 million to rebuild the city, and which motivated a host of private corporations, labor unions, and media figures to offer millions more. The final allocation of these funds and a determination of actual social priorities will likely be made by those classes who are best organized and best connected: the white corporate elite and the African-American bourgeoisie. With few notable exceptions, such as Congresswoman Maxine Waters, these forces seem to have already reached consensus that the best answer for Black oppression is "free enterprise," the old Reagan formula which created the disaster leading to the uprising. Lost in the shuffle to pour money into Black, Korean, or Latino-owned bakeries and dry cleaners, is the necessity to rebuild the entire U.S. urban infrastructure: schools, roads, hospitals, homes, parks and recreational facilities, and to create decent well-paying jobs which can allow people to live with



Some black-owned shops were spared.

dignity. Almost completely lost in the flood of liberal speeches about "brotherhood" and healing is the need to fire top racist Daryl Gates and to enforce some type of civilian control over a police force gone wild in communities of color



National Guard and U.S. Marines suppressed the rebellion.

### *How to heal L.A.*

Hopefully, there will be no going back to the old world order for Los Angeles or this nation. Sooner or later new militant and revolutionary organizations will emerge from among those tens of thousands of Blacks and Latinos who waged the L.A. rebellion. It will be a real challenge for a Left still reeling from the collapse of Eastern Europe and the militarism of Desert Storm to recognize these new forces, to unite with them and support them in their efforts to follow through on the social promise they have created out of the smoke and ashes of South Central Los Angeles.

In the meantime, progressives from throughout the country should play an active part in helping to prevent the return of the status quo. A minimal first step is to support community demands to release the thousands of people arrested for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, for not having legal residency documents on their person, or for curfew violations. These detainees are nothing more than political prisoners of a racist class war being waged against poor African-Americans and Latinos.

Beyond that, progressives can help by supporting demands voiced by Congresswoman Maxine Waters, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and others for the allocation of \$35-50 billion to rebuild U.S. cities, to affect a massive shift in this nation's priorities from military spending and corporate tax breaks, to meeting the needs of the people for jobs, housing, health care and education. This is the new world order struggling to emerge out of L.A.'s rebellion. Whether it does or not will have a profound impact on the future of class and race relations in America.

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