

# THE RIOTS

UNDERSTANDING



LOS ANGELES BEFORE AND AFTER THE RODNEY KING CASE  
BY THE STAFF OF THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

# Prologue

“Not guilty. Not guilty. Not guilty. Not guilty...”

In a hushed Simi Valley courtroom the phrase rang out ten times that warm spring afternoon, Wednesday, April 29, 1992.

Those simple words—the jury’s verdicts in the trial of four Los Angeles police officers charged with beating Rodney Glen King—unleashed a torrent of fury in a city that liked to show the world a face of multicultural tolerance.

The jurors’ decision and the events it provoked shook Los Angeles as fiercely as the Sylmar earthquake in 1971, shamed it as surely as the night in 1968 when Robert F. Kennedy was gunned down in the Ambassador Hotel.

Unanimously, the jurors had voted to acquit Stacey C. Koon, Theodore J. Briseno and Timothy E. Wind of all charges stemming from King’s videotaped arrest on March 3, 1991. Laurence M. Powell was acquitted on all but one count of assault. On that one count, the jurors told Judge Stanley Weisberg, they were hopelessly deadlocked.

Exuberant, Briseno leaped to his feet and hugged his lawyer. Powell embraced his attorney, too. Brimming with relief, the four officers slapped each other on the back while Powell’s sisters and mother wept softly. The prosecutors, staring silently at the counsel table, hung their heads. The judge declared a mistrial on the single remaining count against Powell, thanked the jurors and sent them home.

Outside the courthouse, a crowd of at least 300—families from South Los Angeles, 43 miles to the southeast; Simi Valley homemakers; teen-agers circling on bicycles; veteran court-watchers—erupted in loud, angry debate.

As the officers and their lawyers left, the crowd surged toward them. Koon emerged from the courthouse, surrounded by sheriff’s deputies and camera crews. “Guilty!” some people screamed, scuffling with the deputies as Koon and his lawyer darted for a car. Powell fled amid a hail of rocks. A few lone voices called nervously for peace and unity. But public sentiment was overwhelmingly against the verdicts. Forty-three-year-old Rose Brown of Los Angeles said America had been on trial. “I am not given to riot, but just you watch,” said Brown. “Something’s going to break.”

Within hours, her premonition was fulfilled. As dusk fell, Los Angeles would evoke memories of another hot Wednesday, in August, 1965, when Watts erupted with an earlier generation’s rage.