

2. REBELLION IN PLAINFIELD

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*Chronology of Events, July 1967**

Wednesday, July 5: A little over a week before the riot in Plainfield, New Jersey, police were called to a housing project to intervene in a black family's dispute. The officer at the scene had a reputation for toughness and was disliked by ghetto blacks. When the woman in the argument, Mrs. Mary Brown, became obstreperous, the police officer handcuffed her and placed her under arrest. On the way out of the building, she fell down a flight of stairs. The police captain in charge of the department said that she had had alcohol on her breath and had stumbled. Project residents said she had been pushed. After Mrs. Brown's release, her husband took pictures of her injuries.

Monday, July 10: A group including Mrs. Brown and an NAACP leader tried to lodge a formal complaint against the arresting officer with the city clerk, but for administrative reasons the complaint was not accepted. Subsequently a dozen or more youths, ranging in age between sixteen and twenty-four, spread word of the incident throughout the ghetto. At some point near the beginning of the riot, the pictures her husband had taken were circulated around the black community as evidence of police brutality. Some of the youths were particularly incensed, and there was talk of evening the score with the police.

Thursday, July 13: Dramatic accounts of the Newark riot began to appear on television. Racial tensions in Plainfield were noticeably heightened.

Friday, July 14: By the morning of the 14th, rumors of impending riot were circulating. One of the two black councilmen, Harvey Judkins, warned Mayor George Hetfield on Friday morning that an outbreak was likely to occur that evening. The young people were tense and angry not

* We wish to thank Elizabeth Jameson for preparing an earlier version of the chronology, the basis of the present one.

only about the latest charges of police brutality, but about a series of grievances which had been articulated over the past several years.

The spark which touched off the disturbance that evening occurred at about 10:00 P.M. at the White Star Diner, a lunchroom hangout frequented by teen-agers of both races. The police officer accused of misconduct in the Brown case was off-duty serving as a private guard there. A fight broke out between two black youths, one of whom, Glasgow Sherman, was knocked to the pavement, his face bloodied. Other youths present demanded that the officer arrest the aggressor and call an ambulance for Sherman, but he refused to intervene. The youths saw his refusal as reflecting a double standard, thinking that, had the combatants been white, the officer would have acted differently. Sherman was finally taken to the hospital in a police car. After treatment, he asked for a ride back to the diner, but the police refused.

Shortly after the youth had been taken to the hospital, fifty or more young blacks left the diner and began to assemble at a nearby housing project to air their grievances. As the session continued, the number of youths grew to between 100 and 150. Black Councilmen Judkins and Everett Lattimer addressed the assemblage, trying to reduce tensions. But anger in the group increased; forty to fifty youths split off and went to the edge of Plainfield's business section where they broke some windows. Before long they were turned back by police.

At about 12:30 A.M., a young black newspaperman, David Hardy, and the two black councilmen met with the group and discussed their grievances. A meeting with the mayor was scheduled for the following afternoon (Saturday) at the Teen Center. Shortly thereafter police were notified that black youths were making firebombs at a filling station. They dispersed the youths and found about a dozen badly constructed Molotov cocktails.

Saturday, July 15: At 1:30 P.M., Mayor Hetfield met at the police station with Councilmen Lattimer and Judkins and with several other officials, including police. The mayor discounted the grievances that were reported and thought the situation well in hand, though word of the Molotov cocktails disturbed him. In case of trouble, it was decided to minimize arrests in the hopes of reducing tensions.

At the Teen Center meeting, which lasted from 7:00 to 9:30 P.M., Mayor Hetfield, Lattimer and Judkins, David Hardy, and other interested parties met with about 50 to 100 black youths. Complaints about the behavior of police in the ghetto and about recreational facilities, including a long-standing demand for a swimming pool, did not seem to

make an impression on the mayor. Ten youths stalked out angrily, and the meeting broke up. Immediately thereafter black youths began breaking store windows in the area. Eight fires were set, but none resulted in the destruction of buildings. By 10 o'clock the police had arrived in numbers; all officers were put on alert and help was requested from departments in nearby towns. Officials decided to contain the disturbance rather than to try arresting and dispersing the youths. The disturbance began to wane, and by 3:00 those still out on the streets were scattered by a rainstorm.

Sunday, July 16: Officials considered the situation under control in the morning; most police officers were sent home. The area was flooded with white sightseers, many of them on their way to or from church. There was some verbal abuse of the whites and later on, after 1:30 P.M., some rock throwing. Around 2:00 the mayor took control of the police department and, anticipating a serious outbreak, called for assistance from the State Police and the National Guard. At a meeting of 200-300 black youths on Plainfield Avenue, one young man, Lenny Cathcart, began to emerge as leader. (In his twenties, Cathcart worked in a local chemical plant, was married and the father of seven children. Formerly a Black Muslim, he had left the organization as his militancy turned more in a political direction.) Since the meeting was growing rapidly and there were some small disturbances around the edges of the gathering, a black member of the Plainfield Human Relations Commission, David Sullivan, persuaded the group to move to Green Brook Park. Local police were notified of the action. At the park the meeting proceeded in an orderly fashion; ten representatives had been chosen and a list of grievances to be presented to officials was being drawn up. Then the chief of the Union County Park Police, which had jurisdiction over the park, arrived to tell the group that the meeting could not be held since no permit had been issued. After Cathcart and Sullivan had made futile attempts to negotiate with the police, the meeting broke up.²⁶ The two hundred or so angry youths left in a caravan of cars and returned to the ghetto. Sullivan and Cathcart met with the mayor at the police station and agreed to try to reconvene the meeting, but their efforts were to no avail. By 4:00 young blacks had overturned several cars; windowbreaking and looting were becoming widespread. Some fires were started, but they did not become extensive. At 5:00 all police were called in and neighboring departments were again asked for aid. By 6:00 the riot was beyond the control of authorities. The State Police arrived to help local police seal off the area.

At around 8:00 P.M., one of the officers stationed on the perimeter, John Gleason, saw two white youths being chased toward him by a black youth, Bobby Williams. Gleason went after Williams as the latter retreated into the ghetto. There was a confrontation between the two, the details of which are not clear, but the results are: Gleason shot Williams but did not kill him, and was then pursued by a mob of furious blacks. Caught by the mob, he was knocked down, beaten, and stomped nearly to death. He died in the hospital at 8:45.

One hour later, as fear of retaliatory action by the police grew, forty-six carbines were stolen from a local manufacturer and passed out in the ghetto. Sniping followed, and a fire station in the ghetto was in effect put under siege. Police maintained their cordon around the armed ghetto, but did not attempt to enter the area except for specific purposes. At 12:30 the National Guard arrived and armored personnel carriers were used to relieve the besieged fire station. The violence continued until after 3:00 A.M.

Monday, July 17: The police continued containment and tried to draw sniper fire. New Jersey State officials began to arrive, among them Paul Ylvisaker, Director of the Department of Community Relations, and State Attorney General Arthur Sills. At 2:00 city and state officials met at the police station with adult representatives of the black community; local police, however, were excluded from the meeting. It was agreed that the contending sides must be kept apart: the police would maintain the perimeter and blacks would police their own area. At 4:00 Ylvisaker and Hardy met with about fifty youths in the Teen Center; ten black representatives were selected for a 7:30 meeting with officials. Present at the City Hall meeting were the mayor, Ylvisaker, Sills, and the ten youth representatives. Among the grievances discussed were the swimming pool, housing and rental practices, and police brutality. At 7:45 a black representative walked in and said that blacks wanted something done before dark. It was decided that an attempt should be made to talk to a crowd of 300–400 Negroes assembled at the housing project. Ylvisaker, Sills, the mayor, and Colonel Kelly—the State Police commander—went to the ghetto. The mayor spoke first, from atop a pickup truck, but the crowd was in no mood to listen to him. They were more receptive, however, to Ylvisaker and Sills, who seemed more sensitive to their demands. The meeting ended inconclusively, and officials returned to City Hall at 8:45. A half hour later Cathcart rushed in to say that violence, including the use of grenades, was imminent unless black prisoners arrested in the riot were released by 10:00. State offi-

cials took the lead in the discussions that followed. Colonel Kelly opposed releasing any prisoners; Ylvisaker and Sills were for the idea. While all concerned insist that no "deal" was made, it was decided, on the one hand, that twelve prisoners would be released by midnight as a token of good faith and, on the other, that Cathcart would try to recover the carbines by noon Wednesday. The police, who were not present at this meeting, vehemently opposed the arrangement. At 11:00 there was some sniping; Cathcart denied that rioters were responsible. At midnight David Hardy, Cathcart, one of his lieutenants, and an NAACP official went to tell ghetto residents about the impending release of prisoners. Near the housing project two carloads of police stopped and frisked them. No violence resulted, and the area remained quiet except for sporadic gunfire after 1:30 A.M. At 4:00 A.M. a dozen prisoners were released over the objections of police.

Tuesday, July 18: Later in the morning ghetto residents started cleaning the streets. During the day the Department of Community Relations distributed food and milk from stations set up in the riot area.

Wednesday, July 19: About 10:00 A.M. funeral services were held for officer Gleason; police bitterness about the slaying was evident. The deadline for returning the carbines was extended until 2:00 P.M., but as it looked increasingly probable that the guns would not be returned, Governor Hughes, without obtaining warrants, ordered a mass search for the weapons. Late in the morning, to the dismay of the police, the scheduled search was announced over the local radio. Colonel Kelly prepared to lead the search, involving State Police officers, National Guardsmen, and a few Plainfield policemen. As the operation was about to begin at 2:00, Ylvisaker stopped the twenty-eight-vehicle armored search column and ordered the Plainfield policemen out of the search in the name of the governor, an action which further antagonized the already angry police force. As the searchers went through 143 units in the public housing project they broke into some apartments, disordered and damaged personal effects, and left behind hundreds of angry blacks. When the operation ended at 3:35 P.M., only three guns had been confiscated, none of them carbines. At 4:00 P.M. Plainfield police met and threatened to resign unless Ylvisaker left town immediately; he did so.

Thursday, July 20: A cleanup of the riot area, begun earlier, continued. Debris clogged the sewers, causing damage estimated at \$750,000 by the mayor. After 5:00 P.M. the National Guard and State Police left.

Friday, July 21: At 8:00 P.M. the curfew was lifted and the perimeter

patrol removed. Two stolen carbines were found in a cemetery. The area was quiet.

Analysis of Events

BACKGROUND

Plainfield is a well-to-do suburban community of about 50,000 which until recently had little difficulty functioning as a small, homogeneous city. Since its white citizens require a few public services, local government has remained small. Organized in such a way as to reinforce the informal power of an old-line conservative business elite, its mayoral and council positions are part-time jobs, its public boards have a high degree of autonomy, and in general it is characterized by a limitation and decentralization of public powers. Government in Plainfield is a sort of caretaker operation, concerned more with keeping taxes low than with providing services.

The dominant image of Plainfield fostered by public officials and business leaders is that of a harmonious community untrammelled by the conflicts of larger cities. In the view of local elites, decisions should be as non-controversial as possible, following precedent closely in order to avoid the disruption and antagonism that go with public debate. Articulate grievances should, of course, be minimized, and the acknowledgement of social ills should be avoided: Plainfield's requests for anti-poverty money have been kept low, apparently because poverty is considered out of character.

The tenacity of this pattern of thinking is evident in those respondents who still maintain after the riot that Plainfield doesn't *really* have a racial problem and in those who even refuse to recognize the riot as anything more than a minor disturbance. The prevalence of the "outside agitator" theory among influential citizens and officials, many of whom admitted that they had little knowledge of the details of the riot, is another indication of the strength of community-harmony assumptions: for if all is well in Plainfield, the riot must have been caused by outsiders.

Since institutions and power relations in Plainfield have been shaped by the demands of white suburbanites and business leaders, the city has no tradition of ethnic and minority-group politics. It was therefore particularly ill-prepared to accommodate a growing lower-class black population.

Fifteen years ago there were only a handful of black people in the

city, but more recently immigration has brought the black population up to about 14,000, or 28 percent of the total. The black middle class lives in the older, more stable East End ghetto. The new migrants and the black lower class live in the West End, an area in which the proportion of blacks has risen from 37 percent in 1960 to somewhere between 80 percent and 90 percent in 1967. Influential whites in Plainfield seem not to have grasped the fact that this new black population has changed the character of the city's social and political relations.

NEGRO POLITICS

Given the structure and workings of government in Plainfield, conventional politics has not been very useful to the city's black people. The government is organized to accommodate conservative interests, and as a practical matter blacks have little access to the decision-making processes. For white business and residential interests there seems to be a good deal of informality in the operations of the community power structure. But for blacks, who do not enjoy this sort of access, there are few formal structures for the expression of grievances. Thus the lower-class blacks, who lack the resources to develop private facilities and services, are also those least able to secure public measures to meet their needs.

There are two black members on the eleven-man common council; a third, like the others, a Democrat, had to resign when his company transferred him; and a white woman—Republican—was selected by the council to fill the vacancy. Her appointment became increasingly unpalatable to her West End "constituents" as her votes began to diverge from those of the two black councilmen. They themselves have not been able to accomplish much, both because of the inherently conservative structure of local government, and because they are rather consistently outvoted on racial issues by the white majority.

Among the groups representing black interests in Plainfield, the NAACP has had some success in such matters as appointments to local public agencies, but its effect on substantive policy issues has been minimal. Mayor Hetfield asserted that he could not be influenced by NAACP political demands and never consulted the local leadership when a political decision was to be made. As the mayor saw it, even the NAACP's filing a conventional legal suit on school integration was "causing unrest." In February 1967 the NAACP, out of a sense of frustration, tacked a list of complaints and demands on the door of City

Hall. Six months later, at the time of the riot, the council had not acted on any of them, nor had city officials even acknowledged the list.

The Human Relations Council has had even less influence than the NAACP. As long as the HRC acted merely as a conciliatory agency, public officials regarded its activities as legitimate and worthwhile. But when the council attempted to investigate charges of police misconduct, the mayor and other public officials objected, charging that the HRC had gone beyond its jurisdiction.

The Community Action Program has likewise been a token effort. The mayor has shown a preference for remedial action by private charitable organizations, and hence has kept CAP funding requests nominal. He has drastically circumscribed the role of the agency in the community.

Not only are black people in Plainfield frustrated because they cannot get their substantive demands fulfilled; they are also generally angry at the local government because they cannot get it to work for them. They are even angrier at the police department because they feel that they cannot stop it from working against them.

POLICE

Blacks assert that there are two standards of justice in Plainfield. Police, they charge, are more responsive and responsible to whites than to themselves. They cite the case of a seven-year-old black boy who was virtually abducted from his home by Plainfield police for interrogation in connection with a case of vandalism. At the police station questioning proved futile because the boy became hysterical. When his father returned home, he looked for the boy and learned from neighbors what had happened. Outraged, he went to the police station with members of the Human Relations Council and the NAACP. By that time the boy had been released. According to a member of the HRC, although all parties agreed on the facts of the case, the police went so far as to tell the group that such complaints could only serve to undercut law enforcement.

Racism unquestionably exists in the department. Until 1966, when the chief ordered the practice abandoned, the word "nigger" was commonly used on the police radio. Black people were also incensed at the fact that one officer flew a Confederate flag from the antenna of his car.

More immediately connected with the riot, of course, were the misconduct charges in the case of Mrs. Brown and the White Star Diner in-

cident. Together, these incidents, involving the same officer, served to crystallize and focus the longstanding antipathy of blacks toward the police. The younger blacks especially were vehement in their opposition to police practices.

Nevertheless, antagonism toward the police was by no means indiscriminate. On the one hand, the black community had generated a list of the "ten most wanted" officers—a list that was commonly known and widely subscribed to before the riot. (The officer in the White Star Diner incident was number two.) On the other, a few of the police officers were so well liked by ghetto residents that an effort was made during the riot not to subject them to physical or verbal abuse. Moreover, the black community's assessment of the police seems to have little to do with the race of the officers. There are five Negro policemen on an eighty-one-man force. Of the five, two are on the "ten most wanted" list. And the best-liked officers are white. These variations, however, should not obscure the fact that on the whole the police are heartily disliked.

As in other cities, there are few mechanisms for the redress of grievances against the police. Plainfield has no civilian review board, and complaints are ordinarily handled within the department itself. According to the police chief, a few cases of alleged physical abuse have been forwarded to the prosecutor, but there have never been any convictions. However, Plainfield does have a police board which oversees the operations of the department and serves as a limited check on its power.

One instance in which police behavior was influenced from outside the department occurred in the case involving the use of the word "nigger" over the police radio. Prompted by black complaints, a white councilman, also chairman of the police board, listened in on the radio and found the complaints justified. He then wrote a memorandum for the signature of the chief ordering that the use of such language be stopped.

THE INGREDIENTS OF REVOLT

Considering the size of the city, Plainfield's riot was one of the most severe in the country. The reasons for this are not to be found in the list of "conditions" usually cited to explain riots. Conditions in the West End are no worse than those in other ghettos, and in some ways they are better.

The West End is not as depressing a place as Newark's Central Ward

or Cleveland's Hough district. The dwellings are for the most part single-family homes set a reasonable distance apart. Trees line the streets; heavy traffic is the exception rather than the rule. Blacks in the West End are poor, but not desperately so: the median income in 1966 was \$4,561 compared with \$7,200 for whites. At the same time blacks received an average of 7.9 years of education, while whites received 11.7.

In the short run, "conditions" are stable. The riots are best understood not as a response to conditions per se, but as part of a dynamic process in which blacks contend with the white power holders.

In looking for the most active force among blacks in Plainfield, one immediately recognizes the youth. In the years prior to the riot the city's black youth had shown themselves to be exceptionally articulate, militant, and sophisticated. Race consciousness among them was pronounced. Though not formally organized, they were becoming an increasingly cohesive force through common action, often against white authority.

Moreover, since the West End was a new ghetto, not having had time to develop an infrastructure of institutions, the youth were in effect moving into a power vacuum. There was no political machine there, and one of the areas "representatives" was a white Republican woman. The NAACP and the Human Relations Council were both middle class and ineffectual; the Community Action Program, which might have channeled dissident energies, was deliberately being kept small.

The black youths were, without realizing it, becoming a genuine political force. It is quite possible that a skillful and flexible city administration could have contained that force, but Plainfield did not have such an administration. Indeed, city officials and white elites in general displayed a remarkable obtuseness on racial matters. The mayor, for example, though not ill-willed, never quite seemed to get the point. The constant reiteration of black demands, with increasing emphasis, did not impress him as stemming from real grievances. Instead, he was inclined to dismiss them as "the same old hash." And the mayor's attitudes were not atypical; they accurately reflected those of the city's conservative white elites.

In the years immediately preceding the riot a series of encounters grew out of the conflict between black race-consciousness and an inflexible white socio-political structure. One focus of the contest was the schools. It required strikes and boycotts to integrate the school system, and then black students found themselves segregated on a different basis in the track system. Assigned mostly to the lower track, they bristled at

the indignities of the *new form of segregation*. Black junior high students boycotted the **school cafeteria protesting discriminatory practices**. In 1966 they carried on a **campaign of intimidation against white students** in response to unfair treatment of a black student by a white teacher. Four of the blacks active in the campaign had also been instrumental in setting up the cafeteria boycott.

Another focus of antagonism for young blacks was the recreational system. When the post of Commissioner of Recreation was to be filled, a well-qualified black man was passed over in favor of a white man considered unsympathetic to the demands of black youths. Moreover, a popular and competent black recreation worker, who was trying to develop a badly needed program for youths over 14, was unable to get his contract renewed.

One of the most volatile issues leading up to the riot concerned the demand of black youths for a swimming pool. "If it wasn't the pool," said the recreation commissioner, "they'd be complaining about something else." The issue came to a head in the summer of 1966, when the mayor narrowly averted a riot by promising to build a pool. But the following summer, instead of building a pool the city arranged to bus black youngsters out to the county pool—for a fee and only on weekdays.

Finally, the black youths were strongly opposed to an antiloitering amendment under consideration by the common council—the proposal's assumption being, perhaps, that loitering, like poverty, was out of character with a city of Plainfield's reputation. The youths felt threatened by the proposed act, judging that it was directed against them and that it would give the police even more opportunities for harassment.

THE POLITICAL RIOT: REBELLION

The Plainfield riot in its inception, course of development, and consequences reflects a crisis which is as much political as it is racial. The term "rebellion" is perhaps better for descriptive purposes than "riot" for several reasons. There is a well-documented set of political and racial problems in Plainfield to which the use of violence by young blacks was a definite and connected response. There was a deliberate alternation in the response between the use of violence and steps to negotiate with city authorities. There were social developments within the ghetto from the precipitating incident to the terminal action which gave rise to a loosely structured black leadership and to the establishment, partly by

default, of physical control of the ghetto itself by armed youths. And there was the emergence of a high degree of racial-communal solidarity which continued after the riot and which provided the base for the development of new, politically conscious organizations. Among the elements at the beginning of the riot were several familiar ones. The incident precipitating the outbreak took place, as often happens, at a youth hangout. It involved a perception by black youths of unfair treatment by a disliked police officer who was believed to have injured a black woman recently. Also, a group of young blacks said to have been ready for action since the time of that alleged beating on July 5 may have played an important role in precipitating the riot, though detailed information is lacking.

Another factor contributing to the Plainfield outbreak was undoubtedly the "spillover effect" from the concurrent Newark riot. Many blacks in the West End ghetto had moved to Plainfield from Newark and retained ties of kinship with black people in the Central Ward. Tension in the ghetto increased visibly after word of the Newark riot got around—so much so that Councilman Judkins warned the mayor Friday morning that violence was expected. The riot in Newark seems to have provided a kind of psychological "cover" which made violent collective action seem more plausible and justifiable to the youths.

One of the most significant aspects of the Plainfield riot was the rapidity with which grievances were voiced once the violence began, indicating that previous discussion on common issues had already politicized the youth. At the spontaneous meeting Friday night a wide range of grievances was aired, among them the war in Vietnam and Muhammed Ali's (Cassius Clay's) fight with the draft; there was even mention of the fact that Lew Ayres, the movie actor and pacifist, was not imprisoned for his conscientious objection to World War II.

The inclination of the youths to meet and talk, rather than immediately blowing up, is a sign of the unusual degree of collective deliberateness and rationality characteristic of this riot. While there was talk, there was little violence, and vice versa. Whether as a result of leadership or spontaneous reaction, the participants, especially the youths, showed a keen appreciation for the use of speech and violence as political alternatives.

The second meeting, on Saturday afternoon at the Teen Center, ended with the walkout of ten to twelve militants, evidently a rejection of the mayor and/or the promises which he made at the time. When the meeting broke up, the youths took their grievances into the streets.

The third meeting, Sunday afternoon at Greenbrook Park, was the crucial turning point in the sequence of events. By this time the assemblage of black youths had begun to take on the rudiments of organization. Lenny Cathcart, emerging in a leadership role, had helped to transfer a prior meeting from the housing project to the park. Nowhere was the political character of the events more evident than at the park. The meeting began in an orderly fashion, the group of two hundred or so sitting on the grass. Ten spokesmen were selected, and in the best democratic tradition they were about to draw up a petition of grievances when the Union County Park Police broke up the assembly. As their efforts at elementary democracy proved futile, the youths again took to the streets, this time setting off the worst night of violence in the riot.

It was on Sunday night that the outbreak clearly became a rebellion. The theft and distribution of the forty-six carbines was an effort to "arm the ghetto" against threatened attack. The youths were in effect staking out and preparing to defend a piece of territory. An alien official presence, the fire station in the West End, came under a sniper siege which had to be lifted by an armored vehicle. Another fire station and the police department came under sniper fire. After an incursion into the ghetto by police and guardsmen in the early hours of Monday morning, a decision was made to pull back to a perimeter to await reinforcement. At this point the ghetto was effectively beyond the control of public authority, and young black leaders were exercising a loose *de facto* control in the West End.

The standoff continued through the daylight hours of Monday, when there were several meetings between the youth, or their representatives, and authorities. That evening the mayor spoke to the crowd from the back of a pickup truck, but he reported that the mood was drunken and ugly; there was no communication.

Finally, on Monday night Cathcart walked into police headquarters with a number of demands. At the urging of Ylvisaker and Sills, the mayor agreed to a truce involving a four-point program:

1. Twelve riot arrestees were to be released as a token of faith.
2. Cathcart was to make an effort to recover the carbines, whose presence in the ghetto was especially disturbing to the state officials.
3. Guardsmen and police were to stay out of the ghetto for thirty-six hours, remaining on the perimeter.
4. Ghetto residents were to patrol their own area.

This agreement, whether implicit or explicit, resulted in no substantive improvement over the pre-riot situation of blacks; the arrangement was temporary and linked directly to the standoff which had developed Sunday. But as a truce it was extremely valuable, for it permitted both sides to disengage themselves from a battle which neither wanted. Though the evidence indicates that the police would have welcomed the opportunity to avenge the death of their comrade, they were restrained particularly by the New Jersey State officials with the concurrence of the mayor. While it is only speculation, it seems probable that had there not been outside intervention by the state the mayor would not have been able to withstand pressures to give the police a free hand; and the probable result of that would have been a few dead policemen and many dead black people.

PARTICIPATION

The political character of the Plainfield riot is evident not only in the course of events which took place, but also in the patterns of participation. The nucleus of black leadership in the riot seems to have been a small group of militant young blacks. At the Saturday meeting at the Teen Center, ten to twelve militants walked out. On Sunday in Green Brook Park ten youths were selected as representatives. On Monday evening at the Teen Center ten spokesmen were again selected. We do not know for certain that the ten or so youths were the same in each case, but it is a fair guess that there was substantial overlapping.

Surrounding this core of local militants was a circle of some 200 youths who attended the mass meetings and undoubtedly participated in the violence. It seems that the core, with their leader, could influence the actions of the larger group, but to what extent it is difficult to tell.

This nucleus and the surrounding assemblage of 200 may be regarded as the politically conscious protesters or rebels. They would be young and mostly northern-born or reared. As the riot developed, especially on Sunday night, other elements were drawn into the violence from the "edge" of the action. These would be older people on the average, representing a wider age range, less interested in protest and more interested in loot. They would also be more southern than the rebels.

Northern-born blacks were significantly overrepresented among riot arrestees (see Table 2-1). The northern-born arrestees tended to be younger than their southern-born counterparts (twenty-three years median age as opposed to twenty-eight years), and were concentrated in a

Table 2-1 / Riot Arrestees by Place of Birth

	<i>Northern Born</i>	<i>Southern Born</i>
Total black population in West End (%)	27	73
Total black arrestees (%)	55	45
Total arrested for possession of stolen property (%)	42	58
Median age of arrestees (years)	23	28

narrower age span (mainly adolescents and young adults). Of those arrested for possession of stolen property, the majority were born in the South. (Their median age was twenty-seven years.)

Protest violence, then, seems to have been more the province of rebellious northern youths, while attempts to steal consumer goods were more the province of a wider range of people, including more older, southern-born adults. Many of those involved in looting were women. The latter did not make the riot; they joined it. They did not give it definition; they took advantage of it.

REFLECTIONS IN THE AFTERMATH

The actions of the major parties to this violent racial contest—the black youths, state and local officials, the police—must be seen primarily as components of a dynamic political process which was going on before the riot began and continued after it ended. During the riot the forms of the conflict changed, escalating to violence, but the substance and structure of the conflict—the clash between a newly conscious and aggressive black community, on the one hand, and an unyielding and uncomprehending white power structure, on the other—remained the same.

In a violent showdown it would have been no contest, since local authorities could call on state and, if necessary, national forces to put down the rebellion. As it happened, the politics of repression was complex, and it stopped far short of the total exercise of force.

The police, of course, resented being "handcuffed" and not being included in the critical decisions, especially those involving the truce. Above all they were bitter about Ylvisaker's role in the process; their cup spilled over when he ordered them out of the search, and by threat of mass resignation they forced him to leave town. There were some suggestions, though not supported by available evidence, that the police viewed Ylvisaker's intervention in the search as a doublecross because they had come to regard the operation as a payoff for frustrations suffered during the riot. In any event police morale suffered grievously from the handling of the riot and its aftermath, a fact which underlines the more general problem of the position of police in our society: what would have been required to keep police morale high?

The search itself, though it occurred well after the major violence, must be seen as an integral part of the repressive process. State and local officials were, of course, anxious to recover the stolen carbines, but the announcement of the operation over the radio practically eliminated any chance of success along those lines. Yet plans for the search were carried out, complete with a column of armored personnel carriers and two of the three official forces, the National Guard and the State Police. (Had Ylvisaker not intervened "in the name of the governor"—a claim which the governor never substantiated—the police would have participated too, rounding out the picture.) The search focused on the housing project, a center of riot activity, and was abandoned after an hour and a half. In short, the search was to a considerable extent a show of force for the rebellious—something that had not been considered feasible a few days earlier.

The rebellious, for their part, were not easily intimidated, for the riot had engendered a considerable amount of communal solidarity in the West End. A few months later Cathcart observed:

You see how things are changing? It used to be that one black man couldn't stand to see another black man do something. We were all jealous of one another and each one tried to pull the other down. . . . But since the riots, we're not niggers any more. We're black men, and most of the people in the community have learned this.

At the time this growing solidarity expressed itself in black efforts to patrol the ghetto and in a cleanup campaign which was large enough to cause extensive damage to the sewers. After the riot it was evident in a quick and decisive black campaign to defeat the antiloitering amendment. The day after the search angry blacks packed Common Council

chambers to protest the amendment. The council had not intended to take up the issue, and word had it that most of the council members would vote for the amendment when the time came. But the inundation of the meeting by black people only a few days after the riot caused councilmen not only to take up the issue, but to defeat the amendment by a substantial majority.

A self-conscious political movement was clearly developing in the Plainfield ghetto, and the solidarity was primarily racial, cutting across class lines. The militants supported three blacks for city council, including the two black incumbents. There was also a good deal of cooperation between the militants, the two councilmen, the NAACP, and the Human Relations Council.

By the summer of 1968, when Black Panthers from nearby Paterson arrived, at Cathcart's invitation, to help organize Plainfield's black political potential, the assumptions of racial politics in the small New Jersey city were changing rapidly. While many whites were shocked and frightened by the move, some close to the sources of official decisions conceded that the Panthers were reasonable and willing to negotiate, though extremely tough. It seemed that blacks were becoming a rather powerful political bloc at the local level, but it remained at best an open question of whether political solutions at this level would be adequate.