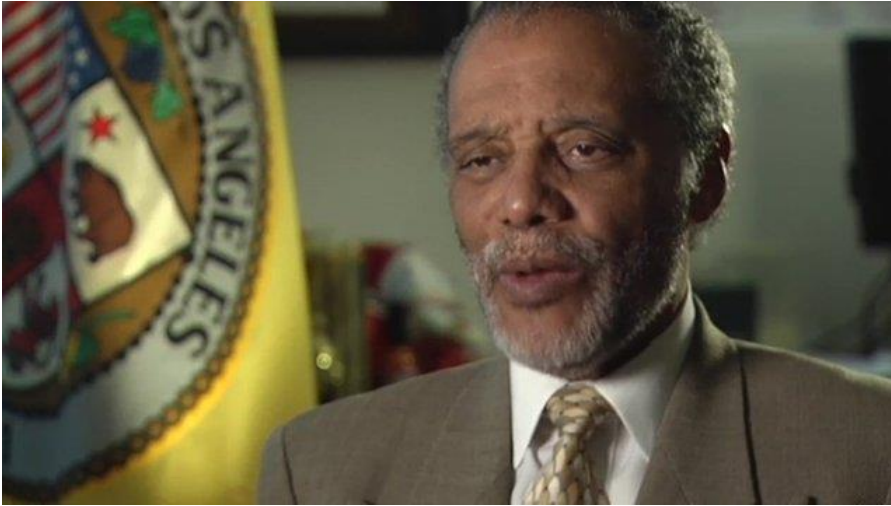


28 April 2012

## LA riots: How 1992 changed the police

By Regan Morris BBC News, Los Angeles



Bernard Parks: "It was the singular most important piece of evidence"

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The Los Angeles riots erupted on 29 April 1992 after four white police officers were acquitted over the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King.

Anger led to days of looting and burning, 54 deaths and \$1bn (£610m) of damage to the city. A state of emergency was declared in South Central Los Angeles.

In the wake of the riots the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) was forced to change.

The grainy black and white footage of King's beating offered proof of what the black community had been complaining about for decades - police brutality.

Some LAPD officers reporting on disturbances in the black communities of South Los Angeles in 1992 used code to describe disturbances in their areas: NHI - "No Humans Involved".

Members of the predominantly white, male police force said it was "gallows humour" and regularly described the African-Americans they were meant to protect and serve as "monkeys" and "gorillas".

An independent commission to investigate the King beating detailed a culture of racism and abuse within the LAPD, where excessive force was not only tolerated but often covered up by fellow officers in a code of silence.

"With the Rodney King beating and the riots, that was the beginning of the end of the old imperial LAPD. Because LAPD had a very arrogant, 'we're above the law' attitude," says Connie Rice, a civil rights lawyer.



Shopping centres and cars were set alight during the riots

"It was the first time the black community's complaints couldn't be denied and swept under the rug."

The commission, led by future US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, depicted an out of control LAPD with rogue officers beating suspects and bragging about it over patrol cars' communication systems.

The report published the messages to illustrate the King beating was not an isolated incident. It noted that LAPD management monitored the messages but did nothing about the abuse.

Some memorable messages include:

- "I hope there is enough units to set up a pow-wow around the susp so he can get a good spanking and nobody see it."
- "I obviously didn't beat this guy enough. He got right back up and is still being obnoxious."
- "The last load went to a family of illegals living in the brush along side the pas frwy [Pasadena Freeway]... I thought the woman was going to cry ... so I hit her with my baton."

Caught on camera

While the use of excessive force was not uncommon, what made the Rodney King beating unusual is that it was captured on camera.

The footage - and the ensuing outrage - forced the LAPD to change radically. But change did not come overnight.

When the [Christopher Commission released its report](#) and recommended ways to reduce racism, sexism and the use of excessive force, some officers reportedly held a bonfire party to show what they thought of the findings.

The LAPD was about 68% white in 1992. When the riots broke out, Bernard Parks, now an LA city councillor, was LAPD Deputy Chief - the highest ranking African-American officer on the force at the time.

"The big battle inside of LAPD was people trying to determine where they came out on the side of whether it was appropriate or inappropriate using force on Rodney King. There was a lot of tension around that," says Mr Parks.

"There were those who thought, 'Hey, what happened to Rodney King, he deserved it, he was running from the police. If he hadn't have done that the police wouldn't have done what they did.'

"And there were others, like myself, who said, this is inappropriate. No matter what happened before the camera came on, it couldn't justify what you saw on the tape."

Mr Parks, who became chief of police in 1997, says the video led to changes within the LAPD and that the community's complaints were ultimately taken more seriously.

Many of the Christopher Commission recommendations focused on boosting multiculturalism in the police force, so that the officers would better reflect the communities they patrol. The force has slowly shifted from a paramilitary style to more interactive, community policing.

Officers who were once appraised by the number of the arrests they made are now encouraged to prevent trouble before it happens, says Connie Rice, who has moved from "constantly suing" the LAPD to working with them.

"I've even got a parking space there," laughs Ms Rice, who has been working with the LAPD on a programme placing 50 police officers in four housing projects.

"Their job is to help communities become healthy so crime plummets in those housing projects. These cops will get promoted for demonstrating how they avoid arresting a kid."

### Changing South Central

While Rodney King may have been the catalyst that sparked the Los Angeles riots, the conditions in South Los Angeles are arguably what caused them.

The area was dominated by gangs and a lack of education, jobs and opportunity. Crack cocaine use was rife and young people often found joining gangs like the Bloods or Crips their safest bet for a future.

The neighbourhood has changed a lot in 20 years.

The crime rate is down. And the area is now called South Los Angeles and proudly boasts neighbourhood names, rejecting the toxic "South Central" and all its connotations of ghettos and violence.

The population is now mostly Hispanic, not African-American.

But much is still the same. South LA is still poor and struggling with gangs and a lack of opportunity.

While much inside and out of the LAPD has improved, Mr Parks says it is naive to think riots could not happen again, especially when there is such a chasm between the rich and poor in the city.

People who say they predicted the riots are kidding themselves, he said.

## Where is Rodney King now?

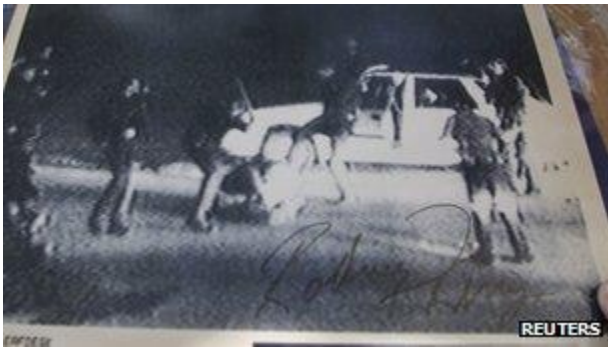


Twenty years after he became a symbol of the riots, Rodney King says he is at peace. He has written a book, *The Riot Within: My Journey From Rebellion to Redemption*. He has been enjoying a book tour with his fiancée Cynthia, aka 'Juror Number Five' from his civil trial, which ordered the city of Los Angeles to pay him \$3.8m. King says the book helped him recover.

"In that first Simi Valley trial, when I went to Simi Valley I never got on the stand to testify. This is like my chance to testify," King told the BBC, referring to his trial which was held outside Los Angeles in a predominantly white area. "I didn't feel like I was a part of that first trial so it was good for me to write this."

King, who during the height of the riots implored people to stop fighting and "get along," said he feels like he has played a small part in the civil rights movement and the change within the LAPD.

"Things have changed. They've been working on it ever since. The whole force had to look at themselves. They still have some work in there to do, some things to be weeded out, but they changed. Change is good."



Rodney King signed this image from the video of his arrest during a book-signing in Los Angeles

## Los Angeles riots: Rodney King funeral held

30 June 2012 Last updated at 23:19 ET

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-18662564>

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The funeral has taken place in Los Angeles of Rodney King, whose beating by white policemen led to deadly riots in the US city 20 years ago.

At the service, King was praised for showing no bitterness to the officers who beat him in 1991.

The officers involved in the beating were acquitted the following year, sparking clashes in which 50 died.

King was found dead at the bottom of a swimming pool last month at the age of 47. There was no sign of foul play.

'Symbol of forgiveness'

The funeral service was held at Los Angeles' Forest Lawn Hollywood Hills on Saturday.

"People should not be judged by the mistakes that they make, but by how they rise above them," Rev Al Sharpton said.

"Rodney had risen above his mistakes. He never mocked anyone - not the police, not the justice system, not anyone."

Mr King's famous words during the riots "Can we all get along?" were embroidered on the lid of the coffin, next to his portrait.

"He became a symbol of forgiveness," Rev Sharpton said.

Rodney King remains a controversial figure in Los Angeles

A number of donors helped to pay for the funeral.

LAPD racism

Rodney King's beating at the hands of the police, which left him with brain damage, was filmed by a bystander and shown by media outlets across the world.

He had been stopped for speeding on a dark street on 3 March 1991. The four LA police officers who pulled him over hit him more than 50 times with their batons, kicked him and shot him with stun guns.

The iconic images of his beating had a huge impact at the time on an already tense Los Angeles.

Eventually, the whole chain of events had a profound impact on the way race was dealt with in the US.

King recently told the [Los Angeles Times](#) that while he had come to terms with his broader legacy, dealing with the past had not been easy.

"Some people feel like I'm some kind of hero," he said.

"Others hate me. They say I deserved it. Other people, I can hear them mocking me for when I called for an end to the destruction, like I'm a fool for believing in peace."

A later trial resulted in two of the four officers being jailed. King sued the City of Los Angeles and won \$3.8m (£2.5m) compensation.

The rioting that gripped LA in the wake of the original not-guilty verdict went on for days, leaving 50 people dead and causing \$1bn of damage to the city.

The Los Angeles Police Department itself was shown to have serious problems with racism, and instituted an overhaul.

King got engaged to one of the jurors from his trial and published a book in 2012 titled *The Riot Within: My Journey From Rebellion to Redemption*.

But he also struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, had several brushes with the law over the years, and he eventually lost all his money.