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Rodney King verdict's riots changed the face of Los Angeles

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NCR Today

Twenty years ago, I was newly married. My wife and I stood out in front of the first home we'd bought together and looked upon our city in flames.

It has been two decades since huge sections of Los Angeles burst into riots after the not-guilty verdicts were handed over for four policeman accused of brutally beating Rodney King. Our house then was on a slight hill, in a neighborhood just above south-central Los Angeles, the epicenter of the unrest. By the third day of uncontrolled vandalism and arson, I could barely see across the cul-de-sac of our suburban street, the smoke and ash was that thick.

I might not have been able to see more than a few feet, but I did see all of this coming. I was a native New Yorker, and moved to Los Angeles just a few years before. I made the coastal switch for all the usual reasons: the lure of the entertainment industry, the pull of beautiful weather and promise of a more decent, less-crowded life.

Like so much in this town, that image was half truth and half carefully constructed mirage. And among the major carpenters of that illusion were the people running the Los Angeles Police Department.

Back in New York, you really did know the cop in your area. I don't mean to paint the NYPD as some kind of unsullied collection of straight arrows, but the style of policing was neighborhood-driven. The small-time Mafia hoods in my part of the Bronx knew all the cops, and the cops knew them. Peace was kept by warnings sometimes, by smiles and a joke another time.

Los Angeles was very different. It was clear to me quickly that the better-off people here had made a

bargain with police: Don't bother us for the taxes it will take to build a large police force that is neighborhood-driven, and we won't question the tactics you use to keep things quiet. Police here raced by in patrol cars. They marched down rough streets in riot gear and used armored vehicles and battering rams to burst into suspect homes. The tense scent of a police state sat over most poor neighborhoods in town, and Los Angeles street gangs responded in kind: They armed themselves heavily; they took no prisoners.

This was not "community policing." And it was not the officers' fault: This is the force they belonged to, this is the war they had been asked to fight by a city that really didn't want to know the dirty details, that ran quickly each night into gated communities or homes high in the hills with security systems of epic proportions.

The riots helped changed all that. The consequences of looking the other way were brought out into the sharp light of day and could not be ignored. The police chief was pushed out, a different style took over. Eventually, William Bratton was brought in from New York -- and he converted LAPD. He made it bigger and better and more responsive. The war-like footing diminished, crime declined and a bit of the mirage of Los Angeles shifted into reality.

Now, reality is not something that goes down easily here -- reality is not the main business of this town. But something has changed: Los Angeles, for lack of a better phrase, started to grow up 20 years ago. It put away the childish things of its own self-centered self-image and got real. At least a little bit.

I grew up, too, over those three days. In New York, I'd seen looting before -- during a blackout in summer of 1977. But those were crimes of opportunity, and people scattered into the darkness when police came. In Los Angeles, it was different: I saw what happened when the social contract simply broke down.

Firefighters were attacked as they rolled up in front of burning buildings. Korean shop owners stood on rooftops with machine guns trained at the streets below. Innocent people were pulled out of cars and trucks and beaten senseless for no reason.

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Cities thrive or fall, humans rise or fall, on that social contract. When it works for enough of us, we go along -- unthinkingly, really -- and our city, our town, works. But it is stunningly easy to tear that contract to shreds when it no longer serves its purpose, when the calibration is made that chaos is more rewarding. When the rules seem stacked against you, when that "social contract" is what makes your life a small hell of fear and uncertainty, then it is done, gone.

What follows is hard to live through and impossible to forget.

Yes, Los Angeles is a different place today, different and better in many ways. But that other Los Angeles is never far from the front of my mind.

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