



# The Los Angeles Riots

*April 1992: Conflict in Los Angeles*

*Sometimes the world is crazier than other times. Just this summer, from August 6-10, the streets of London and other cities across England were aflame with widespread rioting, looting and arson. Although not the same, almost 20 years ago America experienced its own taste of anarchy and chaos. At first, it seemed like just another example of crime in a city rampant with corruption and violence: a young African-American was arrested by police officers. Then a videotape surfaced of the officers brutally beating the arrested man, sparking a string of events which eventually led to riots on a scale hardly ever seen before in this country. Mobs angrily demanded justice, and when a mostly white jury acquitted the four police officers, rioting erupted with racial tensions spiraling out of control – so much so that the military had to be brought in to restore peace. In the interim, white merchants and storekeepers were not going to wait idly for the law to protect them from the violence. They took matters into their own hands...*



**- Aryeh Cohen**



The evening of March 3, 1991, was a balmy one in Los Angeles. The chill of winter seemed to be a thing of the past as spring was making her tentative approach. People strolled leisurely on the streets, enjoying the mild weather, browsing in shops and chatting with friends.

One African-American man seemed to be in a particularly jovial mood. He had just received a phone call from a construction firm he had once worked for informing him that he would get his job back, and he could report for work early next Monday morning. The young man's name was Rodney King.

King invited two of his good friends to celebrate this happy occasion and the group of three then set out in King's white Honda to a mutual friend's house where they partied until midnight. At about 12:30 AM, King was driving home, speeding 110 miles an hour on a freeway in the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles. Before long, a police officer tried to intercept him and with flashing lights signaled for King to pull over.

King decided not to comply. Instead, he attempted to escape. Soon a multitude of police cars were chasing the small white sedan. The wild chase continued for almost eight miles within the city of Los Angeles, clearly placing many lives in danger.

The reason for Rodney King's doomed attempt at escape was, as he later admitted, his fear that his criminal record would be used against him. He had served some time in jail on burglary charges and was now out on parole. He was well aware that for a parolee even a minor crime was enough to land him back in jail. He also had had a few drinks and the last thing he wanted was to be apprehended for DUI. Moreover, this was Saturday night, which meant that if he was arrested, he would be held over the weekend and certainly not be out by Monday morning in time to start working at the job he was so eager to have back.

Suddenly, an idea formed in his head. His father-in-law, who was a retired San

Bernardino policeman, lived nearby. If he could only get to his house, he would hopefully be safe. Desperately, he looked around for the nearest exit. He decided to take exit 6-B which leads to Paxton Street. When he found himself safely off the exit with no police cars on his trail, he breathed a sigh of relief. However, when he reached the next traffic light, he suddenly heard the roar of a helicopter overhead and was blinded by the beam of powerful searchlights.

King broke out in a cold sweat and his heart pounded wildly in his chest. To him, the LAPD was a thoroughly corrupt, aggressive, trigger-happy bunch. He had no illusions about the kind of treatment he would be accorded for trying to escape.

At that moment, Rodney King made a fateful decision, one that would have colossal ramifications. Finding himself on a street lined with houses on both sides, he decided to stop then and there - in the very center of the street, dejectedly musing that if something bad happened to him, at least maybe someone from inside one of those houses would be likely to witness it.

### Police Brutality

No sooner had King stopped his car than he was surrounded by police officers. King's two friends who were in the car with him were promptly arrested without incident. But King was in for an experience of a different sort.

"Back away from your car and pick up your hands!" a policeman snarled. King promptly obeyed. "Lie down on the ground, hands and feet spread wide apart!" barked another officer. Once again King did as he was told. However, he raised his head slightly, trying to see what would happen next.

"Keep your head down!" an irate command rang out.

King obeyed yet once again. Suddenly, he felt an excruciating pain. A police baton had landed full force on his head. King later recounted how the policemen had beaten him, cursing and shouting racial epithets and saying, "You're not getting outa here

alive!" (The policemen later denied that they had threatened to kill him.)

King said later that he thought his life was as good as over. In desperation, he got to his feet holding his hands up high in the air, showing that he had no intentions of resisting or hurting them. He didn't even realize at the time that his foot had been broken.

The policemen's reaction was swift and brutal. King was severely beaten and sustained serious wounds all over his body. He was also treated to repeated shocks with a Taser gun. The entire episode lasted about 15 minutes.

An ambulance arrived and King was rushed to the hospital in critical condition. His breathing was labored and his throat clogged with his own blood. He arrived at the hospital with 11 broken bones and serious wounds all over his body. Some bones had been literally crushed by the blows he had received.

He was quickly transferred to the trauma center in the hospital. It took three doctors and five hours of non-stop work to stabilize his condition. Doctors were shocked and horrified. One of them expressed surprise that he had even survived the attack.

When King came out of his sedation, his relief to be alive was quickly replaced by an abysmal depression. He feared that he would remain severely incapacitated for the rest of his life. He was also consumed by rage that someone could be subjected to such brutal treatment. This was the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the land of the free, the home of the brave, wasn't it? How he wished he could publicize his version of the story. But he knew that there was no one who could ever confirm his side of the story.

Or so he thought.

### The Eye that Saw...

Rodney King would not have felt so hopeless had he been aware of the actions of a certain George Holliday. Holliday lived in a house a few feet away from where the brutal



When King arrived at the next traffic light, a police helicopter suddenly appeared above him, beaming powerful search lights that lit up the entire area.



A heavily shielded truck of the Los Angeles Police Department.



An LAPD armed vehicle being used in a raid.

attack occurred. And he happened to own a camcorder... which he frequently used.

Holliday, a white man, was woken up from a deep slumber that night by a loud