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Senior Seminar 420: John Hope Franklin
Seminar Paper

Riots in American Society

America, the land of the free, and the home of the brave; these words have been ingrained in every American citizen since the national anthem was written in the 19th century. The very foundation of this country has been an upstanding moral promise to every man, woman, and child living within her borders, a promise that guarantees life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. How much of this is actually true? How many times in American history have these ideals been put to the test, only to fail miserably in a display of prejudice and biased hate? In a country whose most symbolic statue, the Statue of Liberty, the first sight for many immigrants who sought refuge here in the 19th century, boldly states “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless...”¹ how can such violence exist? Brotherhood is a term that should fall from every man’s lips, but instead, it became lost many a time in the shadows of oppression and the perversion of human rights. John Hope Franklin was a man who sought to change this hypocrisy in America through words of wisdom, analyzing and understanding history, and the true value of simply having love for his fellow man. A celebrated black historian, Franklin devoted his life to the betterment of the American citizen who faces prejudice, whether it is because of the color of their skin, their religion, or their lifestyle. In Franklin’s young life, he experienced first-hand the manifestation of hate, losing his new home (and almost his father) in the Tulsa riots of 1921. Inspired by this event, I have gathered information on four riots in American history, including the Tulsa riots, in order to analyze and better understand exactly what caused the mass violence,

¹ Emma Lazarus; engraving on the Statue of Liberty

and how the aftermath affected American society. The first event will be Bleeding Kansas, one of the first accounts of large scale American on American violence before the Civil War. The second will be the Tulsa riots of 1921, one of the most bloody and brutal outbreaks of race violence in American history, and an event that directly affected John Hope Franklin's life. The third event is slightly different, having to do with sexual orientation and lifestyle choices rather than race. This was, of course, the Stonewall Riots that prompted countless gay rights groups and eventually led to one of the largest and fastest growing resistance movements in American history. Although the motivation of the riots was not race, the rioters were certainly considered a minority, and the violence erupted from the mistreatment they were receiving; put plainly, they were fighting for their rights to live how they wanted. Finally, the Rodney King riots that ravaged the Los Angeles streets in 1992; this event is still debated by historians for its significance and lasting consequences in regards to police brutality (holding police accountable for their actions) and the question of modern day racism.

Franklin believed that only through understanding the past can we ever hope to impact our future in a positive light. "...we can fully appreciate the extent of our interrelationships with and our reliance on those who came before us... and will come after us." (Franklin 2005) In trying to understand the development of ideals in American society, we must always look to the past in order to understand how we got where we are today. On this topic of riots, there are many incidents that can be observed. These are Bacon's Rebellion (1676)², Shays' Rebellion (1787)³; even the American Revolution can be connected to the event that took place in Boston's town

² <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5800>

³ <http://www.shaysrebellion.stcc.edu/>

square in 1770, an event that would later become known as the Boston Massacre (1770)⁴. An important thing to remember about history, however, is that it is written by the victors. Would everything be the same if the British had been victorious in the Revolution? Instead of the stars and stripes flying high, we would still be singing “God Save the Queen” before games of cricket.

By definition, the word riot means a public act of violence by an unruly mob. It neither specifically defines what the riot stands for, nor who the people are rioting. Classifying a group of people as a mob has the tendency to take away from their actual purpose. The wording used by historians is so crucial, and it is sometimes one of the most overlooked portions. If a historian were to write “The mob laid waste to the town hall”, one might get the impression that these people were simply drunk with violence, and wanted nothing more than to cause chaos and disrupt society. However, if the historian wrote “The band of activists stormed the city hall”, then there is a different light shined upon these people. Granted they may still be seen as wrong by some people, but it does not use a broad brush to paint them in a negative light. Usually, depending on *where* the history is written and *who* has written it, the characters will be shown in several different lights.

During the decades before the Civil War, America had been experiencing a schism within the government, with many Southern senators in favor of making the newly acquired Western territories pro-slavery, while the more liberal North wanted to break away from that practice, making the territories free. The North’s argument was that it would be more beneficial to settle the new territories as free, making it a more even playing field for any new settlers to stake their

⁴ http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/documents/documents_p2.cfm?doc=293

claim on the land and begin a life for themselves. The South believed that these territories were just a great way to expand their slave driven agricultural economy.

In addition to settling the new territories, Congress had other issues on its plate, including the issue of runaway slaves. During the middle of the 19th century, slaves began running away from their Southern plantations and fleeing into the Northern territory, where they could hope to find a better life as free individuals. Many Northerners began to assist these runaways in any ways they could, which led to the start of the famous Underground Railroad (which despite popular belief, was *not* started by Harriet Tubman, although she made the trip hundreds of times, saving countless numbers of runaways). In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, giving Southern slave owners the right to enter Northern territory and “reclaim” their runaways, through force if necessary.⁵ The problem with this Act was there were very wide loopholes, and Southern slave owners began to use it as a way to capture new slaves. A Southern man could point to a black man in the streets and claim that he had owned him. He could then round up a group of men, and force them to help him capture this man he accused.⁶ Regardless of whether this was true or not, the law stated that this Southern slave owner had laid claim to this “runaway slave”. Although paperwork should have been presented, many law enforcement officials gave in to bribes. (Modern History Sourcebook: The Fugitive Slave Act, September 18, 1850. 1998)

Many abolitionists resisted this new act, but found themselves fighting a losing battle. Violence began to break out in the streets, resulting in beatings of Southerners in Northern territory, resisting of law enforcement, and the harboring of runaway slaves. In one instance the

⁵ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1850fugitive.html>

⁶ <http://education.ucdavis.edu/NEW/STC/lesson/socstud/railroad/SlaveLaw.htm>

townspeople actually chained off the town hall with the anchors of the ships in the harbor to prevent a freed black man being sent back into slavery. The tension was extremely high, and the abolitionist movement was simply looking for that spark to ignite the blaze.

One particular section of new territory, the Kansas-Nebraska area, was of specific importance. The land happened to be above the Missouri Compromise⁷ of 1820, which declared that the area should be a free state. Southern senators were pushing for a pro-slavery government in the area, and Congress was back and forth on the issue. In an attempt to quell the issue, Stephen Douglas, a democratic senator, proposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act to Congress. This act would divide the Louisiana Purchase into two territories, Kansas and Nebraska. The act was passed in 1854.⁸ Since the Missouri Compromise was removed by The Compromise of 1850, it played no role in helping to distinguish whether the territories would be free or pro-slavery territories. It was now on the settlers of the new territory to decide the stance that the new governments would take on slavery. It was a mad dash for both the North and South to settle these areas, hoping to create a government that supported their stance on the issue of slavery.

When Kansas drafted a constitution, there was a vote about slavery. Missourians crossed the border into the territory, and voted illegally to pass a pro-slavery government. Outraged, Northern settlers began to set up their own government. Kansas was under two completely different ideologies, and tensions were running high. Neither government could exercise power over the other, nor Kansas was not large enough for two governments to co-exist. According to

⁷ Missouri Compromise Line was established under the presidency of James Monroe. It was set at the 36° 30' line. All territory above the line was said to be free, while below would be pro-slavery territory.

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Missouri.html>

⁸ <http://www1.assumption.edu/ahc/Kansas/default.html>

John H. Gihon, secretary of Governor Geary at the time, armed men began to attack anti-slavery camps near the town of Lawrence. “They demanded that the abolitionists should take away their tents and be off at short notice, or otherwise they would be 'wiped out.’” (Gihon 1857) Anti-slavery settlers were not about to take this lightly, and began to mass their numbers in order to fight back. John Brown, one of the more famous participants in this event, was asked to bring weapons into the camps for the anti-slavery settlers. “A company was organized and the command given to Mr. Brown for the zeal he had exhibited in the cause of freedom both before and since his arrival in the Territory.” (Freedom 1855) In 1856, a group of riotous pro-slavery men entered the town of Lawrence, and burned down the Free State Hotel. This hotel was home to several printing presses that published an anti-slavery newsletter. In response, John Brown led a raid of men on Pottawatomie Creek, dragging five pro-slavery men from their homes and brutally butchering them in the streets. Not only were fights breaking out in the streets, but in Congress, Senator Charles Sumner was caned in his office after delivering a speech speaking out against the atrocities taking place in Kansas by the pro-slavery settlers.⁹

The fighting continued, and eventually the death toll numbered 55 in 1856, and the damage to property was over \$2 million dollars. Kansas did not become a state until the Confederacy seceded, despite the efforts of the anti-slavery settlers living in the territory.¹⁰ Kansas was a bloody battleground between anti-slavery and pro-slavery settlers, setting the stage for the upcoming larger scale Civil War.

⁹ <http://www.senate.gov/vtour/sumner.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2952.html>

Interpretation is another important part of history. Depending on who is reading the history can affect how it is interpreted. This is true in other aspects of life; such as how individuals handle certain situations they are thrust into. Franklin talked about the Tulsa riots briefly in his book Mirror to America. He mainly brings it up in order to explain how scared his family was; not knowing whether or not his father had survived the riots. “For days we did not know if my father was dead, injured, or unharmed” (Franklin 2005) Franklin’s fear came with good reason, because the Tulsa riots were extremely violent.

Trying to give an idea exactly how violent the riots were, James Patrick writes “From the evening of May 31st, to the afternoon of June 1, 1921, more Americans killed fellow Americans in the Tulsa riot than probably anytime since the Civil War.” (Patrick 1999) It was not an isolated incident, either. Sources prove that between the years of 1917-1923, across Oklahoma specifically, there were very high numbers of lynching and murders of African Americans.

Getting back to the idea of interpretation, a single person usually does not have a very large effect on a wide spread basis. However, on the fateful day of May 30th, 1921, that is exactly what happened. Tulsa was a segregated community, and within every segregated community, tension is always high. A simple act of misunderstanding can lead to violence. Dick Rowland unfortunately experienced this first hand. A black shoe shiner, Dick Rowland was attempting to board an elevator in a Tulsa business office. The facts are not entirely known, but most agree that the elevator “hadn’t stopped evenly with the floor, Mr. Rowland tripped and fell on the operator, a 17-year-old white girl named Sarah Page.” (Patrick 1999) Rather than simply understanding that the elevator was broken, and probably fueled by feelings of prejudice, this young girl

immediately interpreted that this man was attacking her. Rowland tried to explain he had tripped, but in trying to restrain the young lady, he was arrested.

While in jail, large mobs of white males, prompted by a newspaper editorial calling for Rowland's head, threatened to enter the jailhouse and lynch Rowland. When word of these threats reached the African American community, many black men armed themselves and marched on the jailhouse. After convincing these armed civilians that nothing was wrong and that Rowland was in safe hands, a deputy tried to disarm one of the men. A shot rang out, and before the afternoon was over, 12 men were dead. In response to this, large mobs of white men marched on the all black district of Greenwood, a business district referred to as "the black Wall Street", and began to destroy everything in their path. "They leveled 35 square blocks, murdered, raped and robbed, and committed other atrocities against African Americans. They used machine guns and airplanes that dropped nitroglycerin and dynamite in an all out attack on the African American section of town, killing, looting and burning everything in sight. It was reported that some police officers were in these airplanes." (Patrick 1999)

This event in American history was the most horrendous act of American on American violence since the Civil War. It is only reported that 35 blacks lost their lives, but speculation believes the number to be much higher, with some sources placing it in the thousands. The National Guard was called in, and martial law was declared. This is one of the first times in American history where martial law had to be declared, and tested the government's response to a crisis of this magnitude. In Franklin's specific case, his father (a lawyer in the Tulsa area) tried to help keep his clients safe. Even in a time of complete mayhem, Franklin's father played by the book, and sued the city to reimburse his clients for their loss. "He was also suing the city for

passing an ordinance that... barred blacks from rebuilding” (Franklin 2005) this case, as Franklin goes on to explain, eventually reached Oklahoma Supreme Court. It was deemed unconstitutional, and marked a victory for African Americans in the court systems, something they would not get to taste again until *Brown v. Board of Education*¹¹.

The aftermath of the riots saw the keeping of African Americans in internment camps, supposedly for their own “protection”. Any African American caught outside these camps, without a green card designated for work, was arrested. Over 20 African Americans were arrested in the investigation of the riots, and *zero* whites were indicted. Rowland was eventually acquitted of assault, because the young girl decided not to press charges. The single event that had caused all of the mayhem and bloodshed seemed insignificant at that point in relation to the riots. A simple misinterpretation of boarding an elevator had resulted in an entire black community being burned to the ground. Although it was rebuilt, the Greenwood district was never the same. Franklin’s father lost the house he had bought for his family, and Franklin never got to move out to Tulsa with his father. The ramifications of this event are still felt today, and in 1999, Tulsa law enforcement had re-opened the case, in a hope to give closure to those who survived and still remained in the area.

¹¹ **"To separate [elementary- and secondary-school children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. We conclude that in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."** Supreme Court Ruling. *Brown v. Board of Education* (May 17th, 1954)



These are some pictures of the actual destruction of the town (more specifically, the black section of the town). The first one shows the large smoke cloud that was caused by the fire bombings laying waste to residential and business district of the town. With little warning, it is hard to believe that only 35 people died in this disaster. This thought is seconded by the second picture, which shows the aftermath of the riots. The town itself has been leveled to the ground, and what little structures remaining standing are either on fire or so structurally unsafe that they would later be condemned and knocked down. The third picture is of the original men who marched on the jailhouse in response to the threat issue against Rowland. These African American men are very well armed, and many of them were WWI veterans who were already infuriated by how their government and fellow countrymen treated them. The final picture portrays one of the many victims of the riots. Bodies littered the streets, and death was not the only end. Many were beaten, raped, and robbed, adding to the questionable number of casualties experienced by those who lived in the district.

These previous two events have dealt with the issue of race. But is race the only important issue to have an opinion on? In American history, many other issues have come to the foreground, screaming for attention and refusing to simply vanish into the folds of history textbooks. Issues like abortion, legalization of drugs, and sexual orientation have sparked countless debates and reactions among the American people. Homosexuality had long been considered a taboo subject, especially in mainstream America. A large anti-homosexual campaign was one taken by the Christians, who use the words of the Bible to their own advantage in denouncing homosexuality. In an article written by Christian advocate Bob Daives, he states "In Leviticus 18:22, God clearly commands, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." (Daives, 1994) Many would continue to argue that since it is written in the Bible, the most holy and sacred of all texts, then it must be true; homosexuality must be sin.

However, according to Mary B. Alexander, an advocate for the reform of Christianity in regards to homosexuality, the times of Mosaic Law are over. "We reject [homosexuals], ... push them outside our church communities, and thereby we negate the consequences of their baptism and ours. We make them doubt that they are the children of God, and this must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy. We blame them for something that is becoming increasingly clear they can do little about." (Alexander, 1996) This radical new outlook on the lifestyles of homosexuals made it less of an automatic write-off to Hell, but still not completely acceptable. More recently, marriage has been altered as well. It is now legal in several states, including two in the Northeast,

for same-sex couples to enter into wedlock I have included a list of these states in my citations, as well as a website that maps out the entire country and each state's stance on the issue.¹²

Over the past few decades, we as a people have made great strides in the acceptance of homosexuality into our culture. It is true that it was not always easy, but the strides were and are being made to better the lives of this group of individuals. Although it still remains a hotly debated issue, gay rights has become one of the strongest and most active platforms in politics. Where we are now as a people is quite far from where we began, and the Stonewall Riots were a stepping stone onto the platform of action.

In 1969, in New York's Greenwich Village, a bar was raided by police. The bar was called Stonewall Inn, and at the time it was controlled by mafia bosses and underground bookies, using the gay bar as cover. (Wright 1999) The event was nothing new; police raided gay bars quite often, dispersing the crowds and arresting any they felt posed a threat. Lionel Wright refers to the event as "unremarkable" in his article written in 1999. Everyone knew what they were supposed to do: the police would come in, start roughing up the "queers", and haul some of them off in the paddy wagons to be booked on bogus charges. The patrons (among them gay men and women, transgenders, drag queens, and bi-sexuals) were supposed to sit back, let it happen and simply let it roll off their shoulder. This was their life; they had to walk this path for the rest of their lives, simply because of their sexual orientation. Homosexuals were beaten and killed sometimes for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and no one ever dared to resist. That changed on June 27th, 1969.

¹² In no specific order: Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Washington law allows for civil union with rights equal to marriage, while Nevada and Oregon are still debating that very issue. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112448663>

Lionel Wright, a writer for London's Socialist Party's monthly journal, *Socialism Today*, tried to shed light on the Stonewall Riots. Wright wrote, "A debate still rages over which incident sparked the riot. Was it a 'butch' lesbian dressed in man's clothes who resisted arrest, or a male drag queen who stopped in the doorway between the officers and posed defiantly, rallying the crowd? (Wright, 1999) Regardless of who started it, the historical events of that night were about to unfold. Instead of going quietly and complying, the patrons began fighting back. At first they would throw coins or spit at the police officers, but soon it escalated to bottles and rocks. Trashcans were lit on fire and hurled at the paddy wagons; innocent bystanders were being beaten by Billy clubs, only to have a man wearing 3-inch heels and a wig come to their rescue, whacking the officers with his purse. Soon the word spread to the surrounding area what was happening, and before the police knew it, mass crowds of homosexual inhabitants of the Village were spilling upon them. After retreating into the bar, the fighting only got worse.

A special unit was called in, one that specifically dealt with Anti-Vietnam groups on college campuses. As hard as they fought to gain control, however, the rioters came back twice as hard. After it was over, several police officers were injured, a bar patron lost two fingers, and many bystanders were caught in the crossfire. The next few days were when the rallying really started. Homosexual individuals from all over the area came to Stonewall Inn to pass out flyers and protest the savage treatment of gays by the police. This protesting went on for five days.¹³

Out of the Stonewall Riots, the Gay liberation Front was born. This movement was started by members of the gay community in the Greenwich Village area. They felt they had

¹³ <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/exhibitions/sw25/case1.html> I have attached this link to actual newspaper clippings from the time of the riots. The language is not very "politically correct", but it gives a clearer view into the mindset of the general public during the time of the riots.

suffered too long under the oppressive discrimination against homosexuals. The law was harsh on the gay community, arresting any same-sex couples for simply holding hands in public or admitting homosexuals into mental institutions to try and “cure” their “illness”.

Before the riots, gay rights were still on the radar. A man by the name of Harry Hay, avid member of the Communist Party in America, started a group called the Mattachine Society. The group worked in tiers, and organized events such as protests, lobbying, and other actions to try and repel the discrimination of gay men and women. In response to the Red Scare witch hunting tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy, Hay and his followers took a democratic approach to their lobbying, but met stiff resistance. After years of fighting back through politics, Hay folded the group to conservative control in the mid 1950s (eventually the offices would completely shut down in 1980)¹⁴, and the gay rights movement faded into the past.

Other political groups, such as the Daughters of Bilitis (a conservative lesbian rights group) fought long and hard to gain influence in American politics. The Daughters of Bilitis was started in 1955 in San Francisco. Their goal was to provide lesbians an alternative social outlet (different from shady bars and nightclubs) and to promote a positive social image for young gay women in society. DOB partnered up with the Mattachine Society, and even had a magazine that they printed monthly. However, the DOB experienced political troubles, and was dismantled in 1970.¹⁵

¹⁴ http://www.harryhay.com/AH_matt.html

¹⁵ Poe, Cynthia R.. "Daughters of Bilitis." *Dictionary of American History*. The Gale Group Inc. 2003. *Encyclopedia.com*. (December 23, 2009). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3401801140.html>

The struggle for gay rights seemed to be struggling to stay afloat. Then Stonewall happened. After those events, gay activist groups began to spring up everywhere, with a drive not seen before. The gay community now knew they were capable of making a stand; if society wanted to kick them around, they would simply kick back. They did so through more than just violence and riots, but through political actions. Gay rights is still one of the sensitive and hotly debated topics in society today, but because of the actions of those at Stonewall, the gay community no longer feels inferior. They no longer feel weak compared to society or law enforcement, not even to the hate groups that neither understand nor care for their lifestyles. It all can be traced back to that one night, where a drag queen stood between the police and the gays, the lesbians, the transgenders, and simply defied all authority by crying out “Gay Power!” The chant then spilled out into the streets, among the rioters, and echoes still in the halls of society. But it is more than an echo now; it has become as loud as a foghorn, leading lost ships to a safe port after traveling in a dangerous sea.

The final event of this document might just be the most prominent and definitely the most recent of the four: the Rodney King riots. These riots ravaged the streets of Los Angeles for six full days, and not only devastated that area, but spurred riots across both America and Canada. The most horrifying part of the riots for those who watched from the “outside” was that much of American society believed that racism had died in the 1970s, and that the only cases of it were few and far between. They believed that in America, surely not in the 1990s, racism could not possibly exist. For six days, what the news portrayed, proved them all very wrong.

March 3rd, 1991 was just like any other day in Los Angeles: the weather was sunny, people attended their everyday business, and life went on as usual. Four police officers were

engaged in a heart pounding high speed chase across the freeways and residential neighborhoods of Los Angeles, pursuing a man they thought to be extremely drunk or high on drugs. This man was Rodney King. When the police finally stopped King, they pulled him out of the vehicle. What happened next is one of the most violent cases of police brutality ever on record.

The police began to brutally attack King with everything they had: tasers, clubs, fists and boots. “Before handcuffing King, the police delivered some 56 blows and kicks and a number of shocks from a stun gun to the fallen body of the suspect.” (The Associated Press 2005, 2006) After King was nearly beaten to death, the police finally put him in cuffs and threw him into the back of a squad car. Little did they know that the entire beating was caught on film by a bystander who happened to be in the area with her camera when the chase came to an end. King pressed charges against the men for brutality. The officers all claimed that their actions were strictly self-defense, and that King had appeared to be under the influence of drugs. The entire police force backed up these officers, and despite the overwhelming evidence against them (the video tape was all but a nail in the coffin) the men were acquitted. When word of this reached the streets, Los Angeles exploded.

Protestors, many of them of African descent, began to riot in the streets of South Central Los Angeles, and the mayhem spread across 50 square miles in no time. The Los Angeles police department was completely overwhelmed, as rioters began firebombing buildings, attacking riot police with bats and melee weapons, and even in some cases, brandishing firearms and firing at police. It was not just in Los Angeles, either; riots began to break out (on a much smaller scale) “in areas like San Francisco, California; Seattle, Washington; Atlanta, Georgia; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.” (The Associated Press 2005, 2006) This intense violence ravaged the streets for

three days straight, until President George H. W. Bush sent in over 4,500 Army troops to quell the violence. Not since the 1960s, when civil rights were being violently abused, had America seen such hate driven brutality (of these riots) in the streets of a major city. The riots were nothing like the non-violent rallies of the Civil Rights movement. Across the nation, many were absolutely shocked to see the violence erupting over a matter of racism.

The three days following the Army's arrival began to see the end of the riots, with martial law being lifted and curfews being taken away. The real horror of the riots was that not only was it black-on-white violence, but there was no distinction between who received the abuse. Gang violence had been a problem in South Central Los Angeles at the time, and when the riots spilled out, it went into overdrive. The Rodney King riots are one of the largest examples of minority on minority crime (blacks also attacked Korean business owners in the street, destroying their establishments and homes). The death toll totaled over 50, with thousands injured and over 15,000 arrested. In response to the Rodney King riots (which some have argued were influenced by Spike Lee's controversial film *Do The Right Thing*, which depicted Brooklyn in the midst of very high racial tension, ultimately culminating in riotous actions) many had explanations. Philosopher Cornel West wrote "what we witnessed in Los Angeles was the consequence of a lethal linkage of economic decline, cultural decay, and political lethargy in American life. Race was the visible catalyst, not the underlying cause." (The Associated Press 2005, 2006)

What West wrote has an extreme significance in why I chose this event. Franklin would look at Rodney King and see much more than a racial conflict. Franklin referred to the Rodney King riots as "vivid testimony that there persists much too much potential for racial conflict for anyone to be complacent." (Franklin 2005) Franklin does not blame the riots on race; he says

that there is a great tension that has to do with racism. He claims that the potential for racism had not, like many Americans believed, disappeared. He also believes that the ability for these events to happen today is not a fantastic thought, but a possible reality.



The first picture was taken in the hospital, a few hours after Rodney King had been admitted into the hospital. His face is swollen and bruised, and doctors reported that he had severe concussions and contusions on his skull. The second picture displays rioters flipping over a police car, which is symbolic of their resistance to authority that, in their opinion, supports racism. The final picture is another representation of the rioters' distrust of the police, quoting a rap song made famous by the group N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude), "Fuck the Police"¹⁶. The

¹⁶ "Fuck that shit, cuz I ain't tha one, for a punk muthafucka with a badge and a gun to be beatin on, and throwin in jail, we could go toe to toe in the middle of a cell" N.W.A. "Fuck the Police" For full lyrics, go to <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/n-w-a/fuck-tha-police.html>

song speaks of violence towards police officers, and expresses a general distaste and distrust of anyone in a position of authority.

These events in American History have proven to be legendary in their own cases. Franklin has taught us to observe the events of the past, and learn from them, as to not repeat their mistakes. But I do not think it is only John Hope Franklin who expresses this message, but history itself. The beauty of history is that we can always observe it. No one can steal our history, because it has been written down for us, to analyze and learn from. It is in our best interest to carry with us a sense of pride in knowing that we, as historians, have the ability to study the actions of the men and women that came before us. It is an honorable calling. These four events have left long lasting effects on American society, each with its own unique causes and characters, but all ending in the same cry: a cry for change in America. Each event led to the change of American lifestyle and ways of thinking, whether it was the call for a war on oppression, or the catalyst for racial tension to be unveiled, or the opening of a door for gay rights in a conservative society. Franklin would look at these events and say the time for change was upon us, how did we respond? In order to truly honor this man, we must remember to always learn from not just our past, but our present. Franklin lived through so much history, and we are living our own history today, every day. It is how we respond to our history and how we use it to create the future is up to us, and as historians, we bear the burden of analyzing and understanding exactly *what* it is we are supposed to be gaining from this information. As historians, we must look to the past in order to pave the way for the future.

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