

# THEN THE BURNINGS BEGAN

Omaha's Urban Revolts and  
the Meaning of Political Violence

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***“The Negro in the Midwest feels injustice and discrimination no less painfully because he is a thousand miles from Harlem.”<sup>1</sup>***

**DAVID L. LAWRENCE**

### Introduction

In August 2014 many Americans were alarmed by scenes of fire and destruction following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Despite the prevalence of violence in American history, the protest in this Midwestern suburb took many by surprise. Several factors had rocked Americans into a naïve slumber, including the election of the country’s first black president, a seemingly genial “don’t-rock-the-boat” Midwestern attitude, and a deep belief that racism was long over. The Ferguson uprising shook many citizens, white and black, wide awake.

Nearly fifty years prior, while the streets of Detroit’s black enclave still glowed red from five days of rioting, President Lyndon Baines Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders on July 29, 1967. The commission sought to answer three basic questions: “What happened?” “Why did it happen?” and “What can be done to prevent it from happening again?”<sup>2</sup>

**The Safeway and Skaggs parking lot where the initial confrontation began, seen from the window of a burnt building. *Omaha World-Herald*, July 4, 1966**



National in scope, the commission’s findings offered a groundbreaking mea culpa—albeit one that reiterated what many black citizens already knew: despite progressive federal initiatives and local agitation, long-standing injustices remained numerous and present in every black community. In the aftermath of the Ferguson uprisings, news outlets, researchers, and the Justice Department arrived at a similar conclusion: Our nation has continued to move towards “two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”<sup>3</sup>

To understand the complexity of urban uprisings, both then and now, careful attention must be paid to local incidents and their root causes. These catalysts festered for years prior to the first outbreaks of violent protest. As with Ferguson, many of them have occurred in unexpected places. During the 1960s, one metropolis after another suffered major civil disturbances, with as a great of a percentage taking place in the Midwest as in the East.<sup>4</sup>

Omaha, Nebraska, experienced urban uprisings in 1966, 1968, and 1969. Using the 1966 uprising as a reference, this article documents the revolt, establishes the racial landscape prior to the event, and finally examines the aftermath and implications of violent protest. While local authorities interpreted the revolts as wanton and isolated, careful analysis demonstrates that they were a political tactic in direct response to previously inadequate responses to racial injustice. The emergence of violent protest in recent years heightens the need to contextualize the revolt historically, so that concerned citizens can improve upon past failures.

This, then, is a tale of protest and rage that many did not anticipate, but should have. As priest and Omaha civil rights activist Father Jack McCaslin reflected after years of agitation in the city: “*Then the burnings began; it was inevitable.*”<sup>5</sup>

### Uprising in Omaha

On Saturday evening, July 2, 1966, a group of 100 to 200 black youths congregated in the parking lot of a Safeway grocery and a Skaggs drugstore. Located at Twenty-Fourth and Lake Streets, it lay in the heart of the black community, and, in the minds of many black Omahans, reflected their most central problems.<sup>6</sup> Long criticized for price gouging and unfair hiring



practices, Safeway and Skaggs stood as a constant reminder of racial oppression.<sup>7</sup>

At 12:49 a.m. a neighborhood woman called the police to report a group of teenagers lighting fireworks in the parking lot.<sup>8</sup> Two policemen arrived at the scene to investigate. The bored and frustrated teenagers responded by throwing rocks at the patrol car, breaking the rear window. The youths then proceeded to hurl cherry bombs at the officers.<sup>9</sup> Feeling threatened, the officers left the scene, returning later with reinforcements. Property violence began at 1 a.m. as rumors of police-initiated brutality began to circulate among the crowd.<sup>10</sup>

The group began to disperse from the parking lot and poured onto the main strip. They released their pent-up anger, frustration, and helplessness in fires and shattered glass along North Twenty-Fourth Street. Police gathered at a makeshift response center housed at a fire station at Twenty-Second and Lake Streets. One hundred police and state troopers reported to the Safeway parking lot, and the youths began throwing rocks, bottles and stones “in the general direction of officers.”<sup>11</sup> Only minor injuries occurred, save for fifteen-year-old Aaron Hall, who was shot in the leg by the police while fleeing the scene.<sup>12</sup> Acts of vandalism continued throughout the Fourth of July weekend.

At 12:30 a.m. on Tuesday, July 5, one hundred police officers and state troopers moved to the Twenty-Fourth and Lake Street area to disperse yet another crowd that had gathered. Recognizing they were undermanned, the police immediately requested National Guard assistance.<sup>13</sup> Under the command of Brig. Gen. William Bachman, 44 men from the First Battalion, 134<sup>th</sup> Infantry, and the 867th Engineer Company, assembled at the armory at Sixty-Ninth and Mercy Streets.<sup>14</sup> They armed themselves with rifles, billy clubs, and gas masks and left the armory at 1:10 a.m., arriving at Twenty-Fourth and Maple Streets at 1:40 a.m.<sup>15</sup> The crowd taunted the Guard, encouraging them to “come and get us you white bitches.”<sup>16</sup> No physical confrontation took place, however. For the uprising participants, it was one thing to deride the police and another to face the National Guard with bayonets and guns.<sup>17</sup> Mayor A. V. Sorensen opted to keep the police and 128 Nebraska National Guardsmen on alert until Thursday to break up any groups congregating on the corner of Twenty-Fourth and Lake.<sup>18</sup>

Bringing in the National Guard seemed to help quash the uprising, but feelings of discontent lingered in the community. The Urban League and

NAACP expressed their disappointment that the mayor did not consult with them before calling for the Guard. Francis Lynch, public safety director for Omaha and a former FBI agent, most clearly articulated the sentiments which lay beneath the developing revolt: “The first night it was just the cops. The second night it was the damn white cops and the third night it was all the white S.O.B.’s.”<sup>19</sup> Both Mayor Sorensen and governor Frank Morrison conceded that the “conditions in Negro residential areas [led] to lawlessness and tension.”<sup>20</sup> What began as a specific response to rumors of police brutality quickly became a proxy war against discrimination at all levels in the polity.

At the invitation of YMCA Director Sam Cornelius, Mayor Sorensen, Public Safety Director Lynch, Coordinator of Public/Community Relations L.K. Smith, and one hundred young black men met at the North Side YMCA.<sup>21</sup> Sorensen felt that there were two ways to deal with violent protests. The first was, “as some cities have done, with tear gas and machine guns [creating] an atmosphere of antagonism and hatred.” The second was by dealing directly with the people involved.<sup>22</sup> This meeting represented the second option. The municipal leaders listened intently as the young black men aired grievances about police brutality, joblessness, and the lack of recreational activities.<sup>23</sup> As *North Omaha Sun* reporter Charles Hein noted, “While this was not an organized civil rights protest in the established sense of the term, the civil rights undercurrent was strong, and still is.”<sup>24</sup> The uprising participants echoed the grievances that African American advocates had been making for years.

### Portrait of Black Omaha

The activists’ demands should have come as no surprise to Sorensen, as they represented long-standing goals of the black community. Between 1960 and 1970, the number of black Omahans rose from 25,000 to 34,000, increasing their proportion of the city’s total population from 8.3 percent to just under 10 percent.<sup>25</sup> The city’s African-American newspaper, the *Omaha Star*, estimated that the paper’s readership alone pumped \$600,000 a day into the local economy.<sup>26</sup> Although black Omahans’ numbers and purchasing power grew, their marginalized status remained. In 1966, the black community had little representation in municipal or state government. No black members sat on the Omaha City Council and only one of the forty-nine members of the state’s unicameral legislature was an African American. The Omaha Board of Education included one black

board member, but the Douglas County Board of Health, Douglas County Board of Commissioners, Metropolitan Utilities District, Omaha Airport Authority, Sarpy County Board of Commissioners, Omaha Public Power District, and the Omaha County Planning Board had no African American representatives.<sup>27</sup>

In the Midwest, racism was more subtle but often more insidious than its Southern counterpart. In citing their own virtue in comparison to Southern cities, many Midwesterners ignored the covert, yet powerful, ways in which discrimination stalled black progress. White Midwesterners built their “collective self-image” as industrious, resilient, boot-strappers by “blaming blacks for their [own] poverty and unemployment.”<sup>28</sup> Prior to the uprisings they buttressed this superior self-image by citing proactive though ineffective measures in race relations, such as human-relations boards, civil-rights committees, and groups of “concerned businessmen.” De facto discrimination, meanwhile, continued to manifest itself in all elements of black life in Omaha. Racial covenants severely restricted black Omahans’ ability to live in communities outside of North Omaha.<sup>29</sup> Of more than 25,000 new houses available on the market in 1963, only 50 were allotted for blacks.<sup>30</sup> By 1965, surveys showed Omaha’s level of residential segregation as great as Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>31</sup> These factors left the Near North Side with a disproportionate saturation of black citizens—and with all the problems a marginalized populace faces.

Problems compound in an underserved community. As their population grew, black Omahans’ standard of living continued to decline relative to that of white residents. Julius Williams, director of the regional NAACP chapter in Kansas City, visited Omaha and declared the city’s black housing “lousy.”<sup>32</sup> More than 34 percent of Omaha’s deteriorating houses and 12 percent of the dilapidated houses were located in the black enclave. In 1960 the median house in Omaha was assessed at \$11,700. In two of the four census tracts that comprised the Near North Side, the average house was valued at \$7,600 and \$7,100. The remaining two tracts had even lower values.<sup>33</sup>

Concurrent with the July 1966 uprising, the Community Renewal Project published a report outlining areas in the city that the commission considered to be “blighted,” or in which conditions were “below community standards of suitability for living or doing business.” The survey, conducted between January and February of 1964, found that the entire Near North Side qualified as a “blighted”

area. No neighborhoods west of Forty-Second Street, with a predominantly white populace, were considered in need of help.<sup>34</sup> Landlords preyed on residents of the Near North Side by maintaining high rents but avoiding necessary improvements on their properties. In an attempt to maximize profits, landlords would convert single-family homes into inadequate apartments. This contributed to more than one-fifth of the available housing units on the Near North Side being termed as overcrowded, with more than one person to a room.<sup>35</sup>

As African Americans moved to the urban Midwest in search of a more prosperous future, the jobs they sought became scarce. In the early 1960s Omaha was the world’s largest livestock market and meatpacking center. It also functioned as the hub of eight principal train lines, making it the nation’s fourth-largest railroad center. Omaha served as the home office for thirty-six insurance companies and several federal agencies. Unfortunately, Omaha blacks did not receive their fair share of this wealth.<sup>36</sup> Of the 5,427 black males over the age of fourteen who were employed in Omaha, 1,814 worked in manufacturing, 1,525 worked in meatpacking, and 563 worked in transportation and public utilities. Blacks held almost exclusively menial positions in these major industries.<sup>37</sup> Of the 522 Omaha blacks employed by federal agencies, only five percent held supervisory roles. These employees’ wages directly correlated to their positions: 55 percent of black workers earned less than \$5,000 a year, and fewer than three percent earned more than \$7,000 a year, compared to 27 percent of white workers who earned over \$7,000.<sup>38</sup> In 1960, Omaha’s white families earned a median wage of \$4,925, while black families earned only \$3,418.<sup>39</sup>

Job opportunities had not improved measurably for black laborers since the Depression.<sup>40</sup> Packinghouse positions were considered one of the better jobs an African American male could hold. An unskilled or common laborer in a big-four meatpacking company could earn \$2.42 an hour.<sup>41</sup> But throughout the 1960s, layoffs within the industry devastated Omaha’s black community. In 1965 one of Omaha’s largest employers, Cudahy Meat Packing, laid off 470 employees, of whom 90 percent of the black males and 50 percent of the black females acted as head of household.<sup>42</sup> With skills and experience suited only to blue-collar positions in rapidly mechanizing industries, many black families fell on hard times.<sup>43</sup> The situation grew even worse when Cudahy, Armour, and Swift all closed their Omaha plants in 1968 and 1969.<sup>44</sup>



**"In a second round of violence in August 1966, a fire set by an arsonist caused an explosion which leveled this café near Omaha's racially disturbed Near North Side 8/3. An adjacent service station and nearby homes were damaged." United Press photo, August 3, 1966. NSHS RG2467-24**

Job prospects for young black males were equally poor during this period. In 1960, only 27 percent of black American males ages fourteen to seventeen were actively in the workforce.<sup>45</sup>

### Movement Antecedents

Urban uprisings were not chaotic or disorganized. Nor were they the domain of "thugs" and "agitators." Instead, they were a rational, considered response by marginalized people—old and young, men and women, employed and unemployed—to the ongoing destruction of their community by political and economic elites. The participants in these uprisings, in other words, engaged in violent protest not because they were inherently violent people, but because they felt society had left them no other recourse.<sup>46</sup>

The urban rebellions must be moved from the dark corners of history, where they are marginal anomalies, to their rightful positions on the protest spectrum alongside sit-ins, marches, and boycotts. The relationship between the uprisings and traditional civil rights organizing evolved naturally. In the Midwest, black freedom strategy radically transformed in part due to the long history of formal race-related organizing. As white Americans

watched a Southern civil rights movement take shape, few realized that black Omahans had been organizing using similar tactics for nearly two decades. By the 1960s, however, these tactics had lost their effectiveness. To remain relevant, Omaha's civil rights activists adapted their tactics. The resulting limited efficacy led some community members to conclude that rebellion was a viable and necessary protest action.

In the immediate post-World War II era, a local activist organization known as the De Porres Club, led by Father John Markoe, S. J., implemented the type of nonviolent direct action synonymous with Southern civil rights activism. The group was bold, brave, innovative, and integrated.<sup>47</sup> Their boycotting tactics remained simple yet effective. First, organizers would appeal to a business, either face-to-face or in a letter. If this did not persuade the owner to change his or her ways, the group went public. Members and supporters demonstrated and distributed handbills to decrease the flow of patrons into the business.<sup>48</sup> In its fourteen years, the De Porres Club won many battles, including desegregating Coca-Cola bottling and the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company.<sup>49</sup> The groups also made many enemies, enough to garner their own file at the FBI.<sup>50</sup>



Leaders of the De Porres Club, undated. The group includes *Omaha Star* publisher Mildred Brown and the Rev. John Markoe, S. J. (front). The other men are not identified. Active in the 1940s and 1950s, the group won many civil rights battles through non-violent direct action.  
NSHS RG5503-8



Through arduous and hard-won fights, the De Porres Club and other Nebraska civil rights organizations such as the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, the NAACP, and the Urban League also made some headway, but for many, their go-slow approach left much to be desired.<sup>51</sup> An *Ebony* article reported that nationally “Negro leaders who lack the skills of mobilization are being pushed aside by younger, bolder men.”<sup>52</sup> Groups such as the Citizens’ Coordinating Committee for Civil Liberties (4CL) in Omaha took heed of this shifting climate and noted the call for more militant organizing. In June 1963, the new group issued its mission statement asserting it was “born out of the realization . . . that the existing structures have been ineffective and had begun to exist without any appreciable number of citizens in support of their respective movements.”<sup>53</sup> 4CL’s list of demands was similar to those of other organizations, including fair employment, better housing, and access to public accommodations. They also asked for equal

police protection, distribution of black teachers throughout the city, particularly in high schools, and a black member “OF OUR CHOOSING” on the Human Relations Board.<sup>54</sup> While their organizational goals represented persistent concerns of the black community, their approach was decidedly more confrontational.

4CL invited Malcolm X to speak in June 1964. He delivered his “A Warning to White America” speech, where he told the crowd of more than 400, “It’s time to start swinging. The only thing that stops a man with a shotgun is another man with a shotgun.”<sup>55</sup> They marched silently outside four Safeway stores with placards reading, “We Want Jobs Now.” The company agreed to add thirty-five jobs within forty-five days and an additional thirty-five jobs within ninety days.<sup>56</sup> NAACP Youth Council activists also desegregated the amusement area, Peony Park.<sup>57</sup> But in spite of moderate success in integrating stores and places of recreation, groups such as 4CL, the Urban League, and the NAACP had difficulty



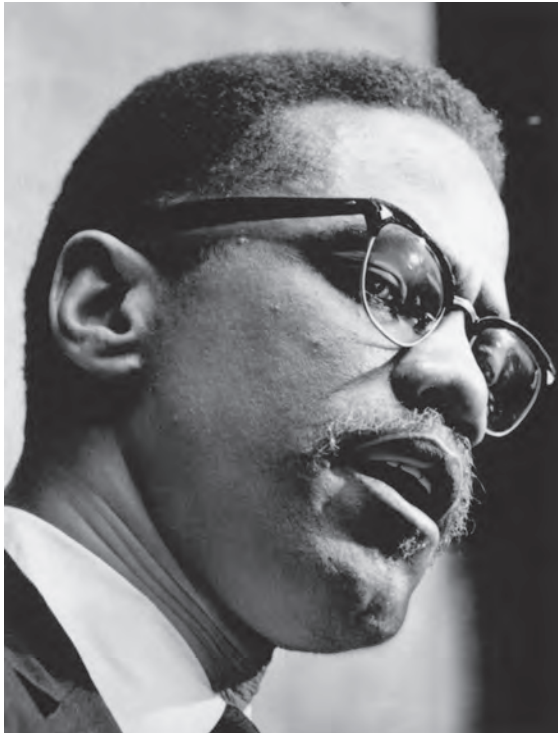
**"Peter Kiewit, head of a worldwide construction firm and chairman of the employment committee of Omaha's bi-racial committee, tells Omaha business leaders about a plan for hiring from minority groups, which he said could be a model for all cities. Others at the speaker's table (left to right) are: Committee members Dick Coyne, Fred P. Curtis, The Rev. Edward S. Foust, vice chairman Morris Jacobs, Kiewit, Mayor James J. Dworak, Marvin F. Oberg, and W. B. Millard."**  
*Associated Press photo, August 27, 1963.*  
 NSHS RG2467-27

convincing the municipal government of the need for more significant changes. They also became increasingly distanced from the perspectives of young blacks.

In July 1963, historian and social commentator Lerone Bennett reported on this "new 'Negro' mood." On one level Bennett described this new outlook as a "go-for-broke" attitude and new militancy in the Southern movement. The new mood also manifested itself in "massive disaffection" and a growing "mood for blackness." Bennett continued, "Dominant notes in the Here-Now-All mood are impatience with the slow pace of desegregation, frustration over continued deprivation and a healthy disdain for tokenism."<sup>58</sup> This growing black pride was the function of several factors, including a new generation of youth born in the North, an emergent discourse in Black Nationalism, and the aforementioned success, then stagnation, of the Civil Rights Movement. These elements aligned to create a mindset in which young black Omahans began to think differently about themselves, their allies, their enemies, and how to effectively foment change.

As early as 1964, Mayor James J. Dworak speculated that uprisings in Omaha were possible because the city council "waved a red cape"<sup>59</sup> in front of militant civil rights groups over the council's refusal to introduce an open housing ordinance prohibiting discrimination in real estate transactions.<sup>60</sup> Whitney Young, who headed the Omaha Urban League from 1950 until 1954, urged in a 1963 speech to the Omaha Chamber of Commerce that the city's power structure needed to "deal with" Reverends Kelsey Jones and R.E. McNair of 4CL. He felt that failure to do so would result in the coming to the fore "of some waiting in the wings whose methods are more radical than those who are now calling attention to the ills and evils of discrimination currently hurting the entire community."<sup>61</sup> By December 1965, Norman L. Hahn of the Human Relations Board stated, "Omaha has a very explosive situation. I think any form of self-delusion is dangerous as hell."<sup>62</sup>

For Omaha's government officials, black leaders, and many in the community at large, violence felt not only plausible but imminent. Local activist Ernie Chambers commented in a March 1966



article in the *Dundee-West Omaha Sun* that “a bomb is the only answer. Someone will have to blow up downtown Omaha to convince the white power structure that we mean business, that we are damn sick of imprisonment in this stinking ghetto.” When asked if a nonviolent protest would be effective in Omaha, he replied, “No, there is not enough nonviolence left in Omaha Negroes to support such an effort.”<sup>63</sup> After a teenage boy was killed in police custody in 1967, Chambers wrote a letter to the Department of Justice asking them to investigate the matter. “I hope it will not take a miniature Watts in Omaha to convince the Federal authorities that Omaha is a tinder box which is so volatile that a chance ray from the sun on a hot day could ignite it and produce a holocaust.”<sup>64</sup> Omaha in the 1960s, then, becomes the story not of the success of nonviolent direct action tactics but of the anger and disenfranchisement that remained when those tactics failed.

### Rebellion Aftermath

Following the 1966 uprising, community activist Bertha Calloway summed up this dissatisfaction: “It is too bad the ridiculous had to happen before the obvious was made known.”<sup>65</sup> “Respectable” entities had spent years lobbying unsuccessfully for something that a group of teenage rebels achieved in a weekend. Mayor Sorensen immediately met with the uprising

participants to hear their grievances, taking them the next day to City Council.<sup>66</sup> The “fixes” by which the municipal government addressed the uprising participants’ demands could be divided into three categories: police relations, recreational activities, and job training. The first program addressed the former two issues. On July 11, Mayor Sorensen appointed a Blue-Ribbon Committee, focused on creating recreational opportunities.<sup>67</sup> One dramatic initiative funded by both the city and private organizations was a camping program held at the YMCA camp in Columbus, Nebraska, about eighty miles northwest of Omaha, where officers and Near North Side teens could interact. Beat cops and youths fished, rode horses, and watched movies together for eight weeks. This helped the youth see the police in roles other than authoritarian figures, and gave the police eyes and ears in the community.<sup>68</sup>

These excursions were not a complete success, however. Although A.V. Sorensen believed strongly in this program, the police department held a different perspective. This top-down initiative did not impress Chief Richard R. Andersen, and officers who went on the trips often came back to find that their beats had been reassigned. This unique and short-lived program, lasting only a handful of summers, was perceived by some members of the police force as coddling criminals instead of the community policing it was intended to be.<sup>69</sup>

Within a matter of weeks the Department of Parks, Recreation and Public Property and the Omaha Public Schools jointly created a Police Athletic League. It was offered at the inner city, predominantly African-American schools of Horace Mann, Conestoga, Mason, and Indian Hills.<sup>70</sup> Through this venue youth intermingled with the police in a competitive, but nonthreatening manner. St. Louis Cardinals pitcher and Omaha native Bob Gibson helped in the baseball league. Operation Summertime, although in existence prior to the uprisings, sponsored basketball clinics in the Near North Side in July for junior high-age and older boys.<sup>71</sup> Adult members of the community often criticized these measures as not going far enough. Police officer Marvin McClarty recalled how many adults rejected the program as “I don’t need a basketball court, I am twenty-five years old. I don’t need a basketball, I need a job.”<sup>72</sup>

Sorensen courted the federal Office of Economic Opportunity to double the yearly Job Corps allocation in Omaha, using the money to establish programs to offer job skills to the “average negro John Doe.”<sup>73</sup> Government and community





Protestors near the stage demonstrate against George Wallace at the Omaha Civic Auditorium, March 4, 1968. *Omaha World-Herald*



Police subdue an anti-Wallace protestor at the Omaha Civic Auditorium, March 4, 1968. *Omaha World-Herald*

officials also encouraged all unemployed blacks to register with YMCA Director Sam Cornelius so, as Sorensen stated, the city could “use our energies to put the man and the job together.” Phillip C. Sorensen, lieutenant governor and no relation to the mayor, headed a six-man committee to set up a state employment office to take inventory of human resources. Mere days after rebels first engaged in violence, the city hired more than 200 blacks in municipal jobs.<sup>74</sup>

The Paxton Hotel opened as a downtown site for the city’s network of more than eighty-five job-training centers.<sup>75</sup> It was a mixed success, however, because the presence of so many young black men and women frightened shoppers and led to complaints from the business community.<sup>76</sup> The Job Corps site expanded and the Office of Economic Opportunity awarded the Burroughs Corporation a contract for \$2,110,977 to expand the Omaha Women’s Job Corps Center. This allowed the Paxton Hotel to accommodate 465 more Job Corps women. The Regis Hotel, a training center in operation since June 29, 1965, served 335 women.<sup>77</sup> While the traditional outlets for change had made little headway, the 1966 revolt brought drastic and rapid changes. The most glaring example occurred when the Labor Department of Nebraska established a North Omaha office on July 7, 1966, less than a week after the uprising began, the Urban League had been requesting such an office for two years.<sup>78</sup> Unfortunately these job measures were not as effective as they could have been because of industry’s unwillingness to reserve positions for this program. Only one out of every three applicants was placed in a job.<sup>79</sup>

### The Limited Efficacy of Violence as Protest

The July 1966 uprising had other consequences as well. As money flowed to meet the demands of the rebels, it also moved to arm the police department with better weapons and training in the event of another uprising.<sup>80</sup> Omahans did not have to wait long for a second revolt. On August 1 protestors threw firebombs and looted stores in response to the police killing of 19-year old Eugene Nesbitt, while fleeing arrest, a week prior.<sup>81</sup> In less than a month, both Mayor Sorensen and Governor Morrison had changed their stance from being willing to meeting with the youth anytime “day or night”<sup>82</sup> to Sorensen proclaiming that he was not going to deal with “the hoodlum element” and was uninterested in listening “to a lot of grievances that have been chewed over and over again.”<sup>83</sup>

The landscape of North Twenty-Fourth Street also changed dramatically. More than twenty businesses on the North Side reported broken windows, eleven of which involved burglaries. Contemporary observers commented that the business strip along Twenty-Fourth and Lake looked like a ghost town because of the boarded-up store windows.<sup>84</sup> Almost every business had to lay off staff, and insurance rates rose 40 to 60 percent, so that many owners needed federal insurance to supplement their policies. Other insurance companies said they were no longer able to write policies for the area, while some agents cancelled their clients’ policies altogether. The number of vacant buildings increased from 1964 to 1972; however, the percentage of vacancies in the area most heavily hit during the uprising—between Seward and Ohio Streets along North Twenty Fourth Street—was actually highest in 1964, at 50 percent of all buildings, two years prior to the uprising.<sup>85</sup> Between 1966 and 1967, property values decreased between 20 and 40 percent, and the landscape became marred with metal grills on the windows of once lively storefronts.<sup>86</sup> The area quickly became economically stagnant.

The efficacy of the community-police recreation programs seemed limited as well. Beginning in 1969, the police department contracted with the University of Omaha to conduct “sensitivity training programs” for officers. During the course, fifteen officers spent five, two-hour sessions to learn how to better relate to the public. Training facilitator Dr. John K. Brilhart posed “theoretical police problems” to the officers which framed law enforcement personnel “in a bad light” in an attempt to “get officers to understand why minority persons act in different ways to certain situations.”<sup>87</sup> Though well-intentioned, these sensitivity training programs could not stop the tide of diminishing positive police interactions with the Near North community, particularly with officers whom the community deemed to be racist.

The starkest example of the failure of the police training programs occurred in March 1968. Tempers rose when American Party presidential candidate governor George Wallace of Alabama, spoke at the Omaha Civic Auditorium. Youth protestors sat near the front of the auditorium, ushered there and separated from their adult sponsors intentionally, as Father McCaslin opined.<sup>88</sup> Unchaperoned, they began tearing off pieces from their cardboard picket signs and throwing them at the American Party candidate.<sup>89</sup> McCaslin recalled that then, Wallace at the podium, decried “people



**"Omaha policeman James Loder, 30, ...Wednesday was charged with manslaughter in the death of Vivian Strong, 14, (right). Vivian was shot once in the skull." Loder was later acquitted. *United Press* photo, June 25, 1969. NSHS RG2467-25**

like you!" pointed down to the group of high school protesters. From there Omaha Police, Wallace's "goon squad," and spectators proceeded to beat the protesters out of the auditorium using batons and metal folding chairs. Reeling from the attacks, African American youth retaliated in the streets.<sup>90</sup> Shortly after 10 p.m., groups were gathering near Twenty-Fourth and Lake Streets. As the gathering grew, James Abbot, a twenty-three-year-old off-duty police officer, checked in with Central Station to see if any help was needed. Shortly thereafter he received a radio call to report to Crosstown Loan and Pawn. Owners Jack and John Belmont requested that somebody guard their store after a group of youths had broken the front store windows and attempted to tear off the security bars.

While Officer Abbott sat inside with his riot gun, African American teenager Howard Stevenson crawled through a broken window and started to open a sliding glass door granting others access to the shop. The police officer shouted, "Stop," and then shot. Abbott fired from a distance of thirty-three feet and the blast nearly tore Stevenson in half. The police chief stated later that he would "discuss with Officer Abbot the violation of our policy regarding police equipment." Although it was illegal for Abbott to be in possession of a riot

gun while off duty, authorities never arraigned him on this or any charges. Douglas County Attorney Donald L. Knowles explained: "We feel the shooting was tragic but justifiable."<sup>91</sup> The heartbreaking irony of the entire situation is that these young men's paths had crossed before. Less than two years earlier, both Stevenson and Abbott had participated in the city's youth-police camping experience in Columbus.<sup>92</sup>

Abbott was not the only Omaha police officer involved in a fatal incident after participating in police training following the 1966 rebellion. On Tuesday, February 25, 1969, police cruiser No. 104 sped down the road in front of Horace Mann Junior High at 11:05 p.m. Outside the school, a charter bus dropped off students coming home from a skating party. Witnesses reported that without apparent reason, Officer John Loder—who had previously attended police sensitivity training—leapt from his squad car, pointed a pistol at the bus, and threatened the children. Although activist Dan Goodwin, father of one of the children threatened, reported this incident to the police department, no disciplinary action was taken. Four months and one day later on June 26, 1969, Loder shot and killed fourteen-year old Vivian Strong, throwing Omaha into violent chaos once again.<sup>93</sup>



**"A crowd gathers as firemen, protected by police, battle the flames from a burning business on Omaha's predominantly Negro Near North Side Wednesday night where the second consecutive night of violence followed the fatal shooting by a white policeman of a 14-year-old girl."**

*Associated Press photo, June 26, 1969.*  
NSHS RG2467-26



These tragic incidents provide the best examples of how well-intentioned initiatives did little to alleviate the systemic woes of racism and lack of power within the community. Although Abbott and Loder had received sensitivity training, they showed disregard for police protocols in their encounters on the Near North Side. Off-duty Abbott collected his police-issued riot gun before protecting private property, and Loder reportedly threatened unarmed schoolchildren. Although the police department did not explicitly sanction these officers' actions, both were exonerated from any wrongdoing. These events foreshadow the general trend in policing the black community in the post-rebellion era. Even as programs were being developed to allay claims of police brutality, joblessness, and lack of recreation, city government was mobilizing a more forceful, armed police presence in black urban neighborhoods.

If the July 1966 revolt in Omaha represents violence as protest, it prompted city officials to take action. Mayor Sorensen's administration met with the young men of the Near North Side and responded with a set of programs designed to address their frustrations, such as job training, recreational facilities, and a Police Athletic League. These programs were sincerely implemented and helped to ease tensions, but they did not eliminate long-held frustrations. The

August 1966 disturbance and the Civic Auditorium melee led to a new series of disturbances in March and April of 1968 that should have alerted city officials to the fact that all was not well on the Near North Side.<sup>94</sup>

As in many other metropolitan areas, the initial Omaha uprisings of the 1960s truly represented violence as a form of protest. These protestors were not arbitrarily destroying; rather their "riots were an attempt to alert America, not overturn it, to denounce its practices, not renounce its principles . . . For the great majority of blacks, the American dream, tarnished though it ha[d] been for centuries, was still the ultimate aspiration."<sup>95</sup> In Omaha, as elsewhere, most participants hit stores that charged exorbitant prices but left schools and community institutions alone.<sup>96</sup>

If the uprisings in 1966 were built on frustrations with specific goals to be achieved, by 1969 only rage remained. The reasons for young black Omahans engaging in violent protest had changed from obtaining opportunities and equality, to destroying every vestige of the oppressive system that controlled them. Even the civil authorities responded differently. In 1966, Mayor Sorensen still supported programming to accommodate the participants. By 1969, Mayor Eugene Leahy's primary concern was damage control; no municipal programs or sensitivity trainings could satisfy the rebels. White Omahans

generally were shocked by the revolts of 1966. By 1969, Omahans had become desensitized after three years of local “long hot summers,” and countless disturbances throughout the United States diminished the shock value and efficacy of the revolts.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

**V**iolent protest does not occur in a vacuum. Historically, it has been the purview of the most desperate, the most oppressed, those with little to lose and even fewer options for recompense. Urban rebellions, both in the contemporary moment and in the 1960s, are a continuation of previous protests through extra-legal channels. The oppressed amplify their demands through effective mobilization of violence after years of agitation through sanctioned means prove to be unfruitful. This tactic constitutes just one tool in an arsenal of strategies to defend against structurally violent social hierarchies.<sup>98</sup> The violent revolts in the 1960s brought swift, though short-lived, change, affirming to many that only in the fires of rebellion could a new political order be forged. While new recreation, educational, and occupational resources poured into inner city Omaha, the state simultaneously instituted policies to create a more robust and punitive response in the event of subsequent uprisings. These measures represented a palliative to mask the symptoms of racial oppression, not a cure for the disease itself. Ferguson's unrest marks the relapse of this illness. 🌐

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Bias Felt Anywhere,” *Omaha Star*, Dec. 10, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Executive Order 11365, March 1968, 21. Hereafter referred to as the Kerner Commission.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Justice—Civil Rights Division, *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department*, March 4, 2015; Kerner Commission, 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Kerner Commission, 66. Thirty-six percent of urban uprisings in the summer of 1967 took place in the Midwest. Statistically, the next largest region for uprisings was the East with 35 percent, followed by the Southern and the Western regions with 16 percent and 13 percent, respectively. I use the Kerner Commission's definition of the North Central region, which included the states of Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin (East North Central) along with Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska (West North Central) to delineate the spatial boundaries of the Midwest.

<sup>5</sup> Fr. John (Jack) McCaslin of Omaha, interview by author, Dec. 14, 2005. Hereafter referred to as Jack McCaslin interview.

<sup>6</sup> David Rice, interview by Alonzo Smith, Sept. 23, 1982, transcript, Nebraska Black Oral History Project, Nebraska State Historical Society, RG4795. Hereafter referred to as David Rice interview.

<sup>7</sup> Marvin McClarty of Omaha, interview by author, Nov. 15, 2005. Hereafter referred to as Marvin McClarty interview.

<sup>8</sup> “Extra Police on Duty in Wake of Near Riot,” *Omaha World-Herald*, July 4, 1966 (hereafter, *OWH*).

<sup>9</sup> “Youth Tell Grievances to Officials,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966. Harl Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen and the New Omaha* (Omaha: Lamplighter Press, 1988), 204; “Extra Police on Duty in Wake of Near Riot,” *OWH*, July 4, 1966.

<sup>10</sup> “Violence Erupts Third Straight Night,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Guards Used After 3<sup>rd</sup> Night of Violence,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966; “4 Policemen and Unknown Number of Civilians Injured,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>13</sup> “Mob Tosses Bottles but Few Injured,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>14</sup> “Police Arrest 78 Adults, 44 Juveniles on North Side,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966; “HQ, Engineering Guards 1<sup>st</sup> to Get Call for Duty,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>15</sup> “Violence Erupts,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>16</sup> “Guard Finds Streets Quiet but Tense,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>17</sup> “Violence Erupts,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966. Lawrence H. Larsen and Barbara J. Cottrell, *The Gate City: A History of Omaha*, Enlarged Ed. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 273.

<sup>18</sup> “Police Arrest 78 Adults, 44 Juveniles on North Side,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966. “Flew Home to Help End Disturbances,” *OWH*, July 6, 1966.

<sup>19</sup> “Labor Dept. Open North Omaha Office Today,” *OWH*, July 9, 1966. “Officers Get Guard Help in Disorder,” *OWH*, July 6, 1966. Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen*, 205.

<sup>20</sup> “Police Arrest,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>21</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, 272.

<sup>22</sup> “Mayor D\_\_\_\_\_ling of Riots; Calls for More Action, Less Meetings,” *Omaha Star*, July 22, 1966. Title partially obscured on microfilm.

<sup>23</sup> For these young politically conscious activists, police brutality meant more than just being roughed up by a uniformed cop. It meant the constant agitation and disrespect by white police officers. “We Demand Rights Now,” *Dundee-West Omaha Sun*, March 3, 1966; “Police Arrest,” *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Hein, “Causes of Disorder Sought,” *North Omaha Sun*, July 7, 1966.

<sup>25</sup> “Percentage of Black Population in Midwest Cities,” *OWH*, Sept. 20, 1986. Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen*, 200.

<sup>26</sup> “Visit the New Woolworth,” *Omaha Star*, Oct. 19, 1962.

<sup>27</sup> “Blacks Serving on Elected and Appointed Governing Boards: 1966 and 1986,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Sept. 19, 1986. Though Omaha African-Americans were severely underrepresented, there were still people who kept their

interests in mind. None contributed more than State Senator Edward Danner, who pressed five civil rights measures within the first two weeks of 1963, including a repeal of the ban of interracial marriages (LB 179), establishing employment without discrimination as a civil right (LB 347), the prohibition of discrimination in public places (LB 364), a fair housing act (LB 596) and outlawing the poll tax as a requirement to vote (LB 49). "Fifth Civil Right Measure Offered," *Omaha Star*, Jan. 13, 1963. Danner was a black Omahan who labored as a butcher in the South Omaha packinghouses before beginning his tenure in politics. Danner also served as vice-president for the United Packinghouse Workers of America, Local 47. Bertha W. Calloway and Alonzo N. Smith, *Vision of Freedom on the Great Plains: An Illustrated History of African Americans in Nebraska* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Company, 1998), 61. Website for the Warner Institute for Education in Democracy, sponsored by the Nebraska State Legislature. Accessed July 18, 2006. [http://www.unicam.state.ne.us/institute/former\\_legislators/danner.htm](http://www.unicam.state.ne.us/institute/former_legislators/danner.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, "The Story of the Midwest: An Introduction," in *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, eds. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 24-25.

<sup>29</sup> Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen*, 200.

<sup>30</sup> "Omaha Real Estate Board Head Dedicated to Maintain Ghetto," *Omaha Star*, Feb. 22, 1963.

<sup>31</sup> "Omaha and Birmingham Run Neck-And-Neck in Housing Segregation," *Omaha Star*, Feb. 5, 1965.

<sup>32</sup> "Problems Behind, Trouble Remains," *OWH*, July 7, 1966.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Year Moved into Unit, Automobiles Available, and Value of Rent of Occupied Housing Unites, by Census Tracts, 1960*. Prepared by the Geography Division in Cooperation with the Housing Division, Bureau of the Census. Washington, D.C., 1962.

<sup>34</sup> Community Renewal Program, July 1966 Report Neighborhood Analysis (Omaha, NE: GPO, 1966), 1-7. Hereafter referred to as Community Renewal Program followed by neighborhood and page number.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick S. Garland, "Black Economic Development in Omaha" (M.B.A. thesis, Creighton University, 1971), 11-12.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Industry of the Employed by Race and Class of Worker, and of the Experienced Civilian Labor Force by Color, by Sex, For the State and for Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas of 250,000 or More: 1960*. Prepared by the Geography Division, Bureau of the Census Washington, D.C., 1963.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "17 of 27 Federal Agencies Hire Negroes in Omaha, Survey Reports Reviewed," *Omaha Star*, Jan. 31, 1964.

<sup>39</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Income in 1959 of Families and Unrelated Individuals, by Color for the State Urban and Rural, 1960*. Prepared by the Geography Division, Bureau of the Census. Washington, D.C., 1963.

<sup>40</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *Gate City*, 272.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence A. Danton, "The Omaha Experiment, A Study of A Community Effort to Cope with Unemployment Resulting From Plant Mechanization" (PhD dis., University of Nebraska, 1964), 66.

<sup>42</sup> The majority of Cudahy workers were African-Americans. Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen*, 133.

<sup>43</sup> "Seventy Percent of Uncalled Workers Are Negroes; Sen. Edward Danner Meeting Triggers Widespread Action," *Omaha Star*, Nov. 5, 1965.

<sup>44</sup> Garland, "Black Economic Development," 9.

<sup>45</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Labor Force, by Age and Sex, for States, Urban and Rural, 1960 and for the United States, 1950 and 1940*. Prepared by the Geography Division, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C., 1963.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Hein, "Causes of Disorder Are Sought," *North Omaha Sun*, July 7, 1966; Robert M. Fogelson, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettoes*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971).

<sup>47</sup> Leo Adam Biga, "Killing Jim Crow," *Omaha Reader*, Jan. 20, 2005, 10-13.

<sup>48</sup> Bob Reilly, "It Has Been the Few Who Have Acted, Who Have Saved Us From Unspeakable Scandal," *Window*, Winter Issue 1995-1996, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Amy Helene Forss, "Mildred Brown and the De Porres Club: Collective Activism in Omaha, Nebraska's, Near North Side, 1947-1960," *Nebraska History* 91 (2010): 198.

<sup>50</sup> Biga, "Killing Jim Crow," 12.

<sup>51</sup> "Omaha NAACP Votes Unanimously to Boycott Five Omaha Chain Stores," *Omaha Star*, March 31, 1960.

<sup>52</sup> "Ebony Article Declares: 'Negro Has New Mood,'" *Omaha Star*, June 28, 1963.

<sup>53</sup> Nick Kotz, "More Jobs in Omaha Firms for Negroes," *Des Moines Sun Register*, reprinted in *Omaha Star*, Aug. 30, 1963.

<sup>54</sup> "At Noon Friday 4CL Has No Contact with Dworak," *Omaha Star*, June 28, 1963.

<sup>55</sup> "4CL Explains Malcolm X," *OWH*, June 21, 1964; "Malcolm X Declares Anything Whites Do Blacks Can Do Better," *OWH*, July 1, 1964; "Negro Must Prepare to Defend Himself or Continue at the Mercy of Racist Mobs," *Omaha Star*, July 3, 1964.

<sup>56</sup> Nick Kotz, "More Jobs in Omaha Firms for Negroes," *Des Moines Sun Register*, reprinted in *Omaha Star*, Aug. 30, 1963.

<sup>57</sup> David L. Bristow, "We Just Wanted to Swim, Sir," *The Omaha Reader*, Feb. 5, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Lerone Bennett, "The Mood of the Negro," *Ebony* 13:9 (July 1963): 27-38.

<sup>59</sup> Woodson Howe, "Extremists Might Turn to Disorders," *OWH*, April 30, 1964.



<sup>60</sup> "4CL Request Goes Begging," *Omaha World Herald*, Sept. 26, 1963.

<sup>61</sup> "Those Waiting in the Wings Came," *Omaha Star*, July 8, 1966.

<sup>62</sup> Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen and the New Omaha*, 200.

<sup>63</sup> "We Demand Rights Now," *West Omaha-Dundee Sun*, March 3, 1966.

<sup>64</sup> "Letter from Ernest Chambers to the Department of Justice, 18 August 1967," NACCD/Series 2 Johnson Presidential Library, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Woodson Howe, "21 at Initial Hearing on Near North Side," *OWH*, July 19, 1966.

<sup>66</sup> "Youths Tell Grievances to Officials," *OWH*, July 5, 1966; "Plan Moves to Improve Negroes' Lot," *OWH*, July 7, 1966.

<sup>67</sup> "Near North Proposals Total Over \$7 Million," *OWH*, Aug. 2, 1966.

<sup>68</sup> Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen*, 210; William Haynes of Omaha, interview by author, July 26, 2013. Hereafter referred to as William Haynes interview.

<sup>69</sup> Marvin McClarty interview.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> "Basketball Clinics Start Monday," *Omaha Star*, July 15, 1966.

<sup>72</sup> Marvin McClarty interview.

<sup>73</sup> Dalstrom, A.V. *Sorensen*, 211; Woodson Howe, "Rec. Groups Hears Needs," *OWH*, July 21, 1966.

<sup>74</sup> "City Signs 200 Negro Applicants," *OWH*, July 8, 1966.

<sup>75</sup> "Job Corps Center to Expand," *Omaha Star*, July 8, 1966.

<sup>76</sup> Larsen and Coltrell, *Gate City*, 255.

<sup>77</sup> "Job Corps Center to Expand," *Omaha Star*, July 8, 1966.

<sup>78</sup> Larsen and Coltrell, *Gate City*, 274.

<sup>79</sup> "More Apps. Than Placement Orders," *Omaha Star*, July 15, 1966.

<sup>80</sup> "Police Ordering Helmets, Mask," *OWH*, July 6, 1966.

<sup>81</sup> "Two Negroes Say Nesbitt Death Led to Trouble," *OWH*, Aug. 2, 1966.

<sup>82</sup> "Youth Tell Grievances," *OWH*, July 5, 1966.

<sup>83</sup> "North Side Violence Won't Lead to Talks," *OWH*, Aug. 3, 1966.

<sup>84</sup> "Police Arrest," *OWH*, July 5, 1966; "Discouraged North Side Business Man: Had Enough I Quit," *OWH*, Aug. 2, 1966.

<sup>85</sup> *Omaha City Directory*, Kansas City, MO: R.L. Polk & Co., 1964-1972 editions.

<sup>86</sup> "Board Fronts Show Sickness in Near North," *OWH*, April 30, 1967.

<sup>87</sup> 1969-1970 City Council Budget Ledger. Municipal Records, City of Omaha. Located at the Douglas County Courthouse, 1819 Farnam Street; Mick Road, "Adviser to Urge Deeper Training," *Dundee West-Omaha Sun*, July 2, 1969.

<sup>88</sup> McCaslin interview.

<sup>89</sup> "Wallace Party Claims Victory," *OWH*, March 5, 1968; "Sobbing Negro Girl Screams Why? Why?" *OWH*, March 5, 1968; "The Impact and Aftermath of Wallace," *Omaha Star*, March 14, 1968.

<sup>90</sup> McCaslin interview.

<sup>91</sup> "Why Policeman had Shotgun Explained," *OWH*, March 7, 1968.

<sup>92</sup> "Disorder Reported After Wallace Rally," *OWH*, March 5, 1968; "Window-Breaking Started Vandalism Near 24th, Lake," *OWH*, March 5, 1968; "Fire Bombs are Thrown, Six Arrested," *OWH*, March 6, 1968; Jack Todd, "Omaha, 1968—The Watched Pot Begins to Boil," *Daily Nebraskan*, reprinted in the *Omaha Star*, April 11, 1968; "Mayor Vows Laws to Rule, Without Ifs," *OWH*, April 29, 1968; "Was Week-end Rebellion Triggered by 'Appropriate' Police Action?" *Omaha Star*, Clippings File Douglas County Historical Society; "2 Say Police Used Excessive Force," *OWH*, April 30, 1968; "Police Weigh Handbill Case," *OWH*, April 24, 1968; "Looters on N. 24<sup>th</sup> Cause Heavy Damage," *OWH*, April 28, 1968.

<sup>93</sup> Typewritten report presented to the Police Community-Relations Office in North Omaha by Daniel M. Goodwin, Feb. 28, 1969. Author obtained a copy from Mr. Goodwin in November 2005; "Policeman Will Face Manslaughter Charge," *OWH*, June 26, 1969; "Adviser to Urge Deeper Training," *Dundee-West Omaha Sun*, July 2, 1969.

<sup>94</sup> "Fans and Foes Greet Wallace in Nebraska," *OWH*, March 4, 1968; "Weather, Racial Woes Both Heat Up," *Dundee West-Omaha Sun*, March 7, 1968; "Turmoil Marks Wallace Party Meeting," *OWH*, March 5, 1968.

<sup>95</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Violence As Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 13.

<sup>96</sup> Kerner Commission, 67; Marvin McClarty interview.

<sup>97</sup> Buildings are Burned as Violence Erupts," *OWH*, June 26, 1969; Leahy Inspects Damaged Area Talk to People," *OWH*, June 26, 1969; "Firemen Bitter: 'Near North Considers Us White Trash,'" *OWH*, June 27, 1969.

<sup>98</sup> In 1969 Johan Galtung conceptualized structural violence as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual." Structural violence captures how racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination silently infiltrates political, cultural, and social institutions to disadvantage some groups of people while privileging others. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6:3 (1969), 168.