

"'68: The Fire Last Time," Part 1

Narrated By Sunni Khalid

By the Spring of 1968, the national mood of optimism that began the decade had been replaced by anxiety. A half-million American troops were in South Vietnam and the steady troop losses from the bitter conflict had increasingly demoralized President Lyndon Johnson and the nation.

AMBIENCE: Dock Of The Bay,

For many black Americans, Otis Redding's song, Dock Of The Bay, reflected a sense of stalled hopes. The expectations that had been raised a few years earlier, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act a year later, seemed to be going nowhere. And resources used to fund War On Poverty - programs were being increasingly diverted to fight the war in Vietnam.

America's festering racial tensions were exploding, north and south, most spectacularly with a series of riots recurring in black inner city neighborhoods, also known as ghettos, had become a regular feature of the summer. Civil unrest the previous July had devastated large sections of Newark, Detroit and Cleveland, with similar disturbances in cities reaching from Milwaukee and Memphis to Cambridge on Maryland's Eastern Shore. In March 1968, National Guardsmen opened fire killing three black students at South Carolina State College, who were protesting the segregation of a bowling alley in Orangeburg.

AMBIENCE: Shh-Peaceful, Miles Davis

Amid the tumult the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, chaired by former Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, Jr. issued its report on February 29th. The most controversial of the findings of the Kerner Commission? Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black and one white - separate and unequal.

TAPE: IC: His view, of course, was that the ghettos were actually created by white institutions and maintained by white institutions, and were approved by whites.

Ron Walters is a professor of political science at the University of Maryland in College Park.

TAPE: IC: And the ghetto, of course, was the source of a lot of the violence that occurred then. And the condition of the ghettos was what the commission was trying to draw attention to. And they did take seriously a lot of recommendations about how you deal with the ghetto. That shocked a lot of people.

The Kerner Commission called for several recommendations: re-investment in the inner cities; adequate housing; employment opportunities and recruitment of blacks in the

media. The Commission did not deal specifically with Baltimore, then the nation's sixth-largest city, for the simple reason that the city had escaped the bloody, urban rebellions that had shaken other metropolitan areas.

TAPE: IC: I think the city was the beneficiary, at that time, of tremendous racial relationships. Good racial relationships, that I had inherited from the former mayor, Mayor McKeldin, former Governor McKeldin, who was a great humanitarian and was a champion of Civil Rights. I say a champion of Civil Rights, it was at a time when there were very few champions for Civil Rights in the white community, but he was out there. And that ingratiated himself with the black community. I inherited a lot of that goodwill and then I established my own record with the black community.

D'Alestandro, also known as Young Tommy, met frequently with local black activists at the time, including Clarence Mitchell, Jr., his wife, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, and other who led the local branch of the N-Double A-C-P. D'Alesandro would be the first mayor to appoint blacks to prominent government positions, as well as pushed the city council to enact laws to open public accommodations. Young Tommy saw no racial storms on Baltimore's horizons. But there were warning signs and many of the same conditions - lack of jobs, opportunity and discrimination - that fueled unrest elsewhere were present in Baltimore.

Most whites were unaware of the increasing resentment of blacks, with whom they rarely socialized. Jerald Lewis, the son of Polish-Jewish immigrants, ran the Excelsior Cleaners with his father, on Edmondson Avenue in Southwest Baltimore.

TAPE: IC: We all lived in segregated areas. But then again, the Greeks lived where they wanted to live. The Italians lived in Little Italy and where they wanted to live. The Jews lived where they were comfortable and the blacks lived where they were comfortable. You didn't feel that people had to live in a certain area, they chose to live in a certain area, as did I. I would prefer to live where I was living, as opposed to living in East Baltimore, only because I lived with the people I was living with.

AMBIENCE: So What, Miles Davis

At home, at work, at play and at prayer, Baltimore was as racially segregated as any major city in the United States. Baltimore native and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall always referred to his hometown as Up South -- reflecting Baltimore mix of Deep South racial sensibilities and the city's reputation as a northern industrial hub.

This mix was made even more volatile by waves of black migration from the states making up the old Confederacy, that began after 1910 and continued through the 60s. They were good jobs available to black people in Baltimore in the city's bustling shipyards and steel plants.

TAPE: IC: For a lot of people, black people migrating from the South, even though it was segregated here, it was a step up from what they left.

Mike Adams, an editor with the Baltimore Sun, grew up in Dundalk, the son of migrants from southern Virginia.

TAPE: IC: In some cases, if they came from the Deep South, such as South Carolina, it was virtually share-cropping. So, to get a job working for a steel company, making what they considered to be a decent wage and having decent housing, was a step up. And many people overlooked the flagrant segregation here.

But for many of the newcomers, their new city had reminders of the Southern racial attitudes they thought they'd left behind. Throughout the 50s and 60s, white mobs had gathered to protest the desegregation of public schools.

Jim Constantinides recalled the reaction in his Northeast city neighborhood to the integration of his school.

TAPE: IC: Where I lived in Hamilton, we were really quite unaware of the problem, because we were an all-white world. When the kids came to Hamilton Junior High School, the black kids, and I noticed the reaction of my fellow students, I thought again, 'Uh, oh,' it struck me. Sharpening knives on the steps outside from the cafeteria. And I said, 'What is this?' There's an anger here. There's a non-acceptance of this thing. We have rough times coming ahead.

AMBIENCE: Ball Of Confusion,

Quite predictably, school desegregation produced a backlash by significant portions of the city's white community. And, in turn, this produced an urban phenomenon, known as blockbusting.

David Michael Ettlin, a former Baltimore Sun reporter and editor, grew up in the all-white neighborhood of Park Heights.

TAPE: IC: Real estate speculators were trying to panic people in neighborhoods on the cusp of change. They wanted people to believe that there were black families were moving into the neighborhood, and that the consequence of that was that the value of their property would decline. That now was the time to sell, before your house drops in value by half. And they would find someone who was selling a home, they would put a sign on the front lawn, they would market that particular property through the Afro-American newspaper, rather than any other media. They would try to get the first black family on to a block that was all-white. And as that happened, they would increase the pressure on other property owners that, 'You should sell your house now.' And a couple of other signs would appear that it was like mushrooms on front lawns, there would be 'For Sale' signs.

Racial segregation in Baltimore extended far beyond schools and housing.

Criminal defense attorney and former Judge Billy Murphy describes how many black Baltimoreans, impatient for major change, viewed the racial, social and political predicament they faced in the Spring of 1968.

TAPE: (22 SECONDS)

IC: Every significant institution was virtually all white, except in the lower levels, maintenance, handyman, physical labor. Banking: all-white. Insurance: all-white. The political structure: virtually all-white. Newspapers: all-white.

AMBIENCE: Heard It Through The Grapevine,

In 1968, even the news was segregated. Blacks read the Afro-American for news about themselves. The Baltimore Sun and the rival News-American had less than a handful of black reporters.

Long-time local newspaper columnist Michael Olesker was a reporter for the Baltimore News-American in 1968.

TAPE: IC: Black people were complete afterthoughts in the daily newspapers here, as if they didn't exist. There were black kids in Vietnam and you never heard about them. You only saw black people in newspapers here was when Frank Robinson hit a homerun for the Orioles or Lenny Moore scored a touchdown for the Colts.

AMBIENCE: So What,

Lenny Moore was the Hall of Fame running back of the Colts glory years of the 50s and 60s. The city's major league teams, the Orioles and the Colts were perhaps the only institutions to which Baltimoreans of all colors shared a fierce loyalty. Both teams were integrated, as were the large crowds that attended games at venerated Memorial Stadium on 33rd Street. But he says the team's on-field racial harmony ended outside the locker room.

TAPE: IC: When the Baltimore Colts came on that football field, we became one. When the game was over, it was, you know, you go your way, we will go our way. We never had the opportunity, as a team, to socialize.

Moore recalled a locker room confrontation between two of the team's biggest stars - one black, the other white.

TAPE: IC: Big Daddy' Lipscomb, the late great, and Bill Pellington, one of our linebackers, got into a little word-ology, 'to each other, and the next thing you know, they was ready to square-off. And what I noticed, when they got ready to square-off, the white players kind of separated themselves on to where Pellington was, and, of course, there were just a handful of us. So, that was a little shaky, but it let you know that the situation

was still primarily about the same. When it gets down to squaring-off, it's still black versus white.

AMBIENCE: Respect,

In the mid-60s, the segregation that seemed mild and ordinary to many whites was a constant humiliation to black Baltimoreans whenever they ventured downtown to shop. The major department stores of that day, including Hutzlers, Stewarts, Hoschiel-Cohn's and the Hecht Company maintained storewide policies of racial segregation.

TAPE: IC: It seemed as though society was always trying to impose the idea of your inferiority.

The endless stream of racial public indignities had an impact on the collective psyche of black Baltimore. Again, Mike Adams.

TAPE: IC: For example, if you were standing in line at a drug store downtown, and somebody white came in and they were behind you, often the clerks would wait on them. And they would make a point of calling them up to the front of the line to wait on them before they waited on you. Also, stores downtown, uh, there was even no place to go to the bathroom. So, you know, as a child, you learned to hold your bowels when you went downtown, because there was virtually no place to go.

TAPE: IC: I can remember going into Stewart's and not understanding why we couldn't go back to the dressing rooms to try on clothes, and having to stand in the aisles and put on a blouse over our clothes.

Yolanda Powell recalls what it was like to shop as a young girl with her mother downtown in the mid-60s.

TAPE: IC: And also going to restaurants and not being able to eat back in the dining area, eating at the counter and a questioning why. At that time, my mother, she would always make a game out of it for me. She would tell me that we were like having a picnic, and we were having more fun where we were, rather than sitting back at the tables. But I often questioned that because I saw how pretty it was with the tablecloths and napkins. But because she made it so much fun, it was fine with me.

By the Spring of 1968, many of these overt practices remained, even as the established black leadership in Baltimore continued to push the envelope for change. They organizing public protests and lobbied at City Hall and the State House in Annapolis. Students at Morgan State College staged public demonstrations against racial

discriminatory practices.

AMBIENCE: Cloud Nine,

Black communities across the nation were being pulled in two different directions. Young militants, like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, were being invited to speak at churches and rallies in Baltimore. The fledgling Black Panther Party had established branches in several major cities. Disillusionment grew with the tactics of non-violent resistance adopted by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These young militants advocated armed self-defense in direct confrontations with white authorities. Their mantra? Black Power.

Not quite five years removed from his famous, I Have A Dream, speech at the March on Washington, Dr. King was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, but no longer the unquestioned leader of the Civil Rights movement in the Spring of 1968.

Jack White, former columnist with Time magazine, was a young reporter with the Washington Post then.

TAPE: IC: I remember him being called, De Lawd,' L-A-W-D, by some of the younger activists, in a derisive kind of way. He was already being seen as being the leader of an accomodationist wing of the movement, What previously had been seen as militant, you know, the sit-ins, the non-violent demonstrations and so on, were being increasingly challenged by the Black Power stratum.

White said there was pervasive anxiety at the time, with fears that the nation was spinning out of control.

TAPE: IC: 1968 was a year in which you could believe that the United States was actually on the brink of a breakdown or a revolution and not be crazy. 1968 was a year in which rational, sensible people could believe that everything was gonna change.

Adding to the dynamic of those politically charged times was Dr. King, himself. In April 1967, the Civil Rights leader, who had been under FBI surveillance since the early part of the decade, had lent his support to the growing chorus of voices opposing the Vietnam War. It was a decision that put at odds with most of the established Civil Rights leadership, as well as President Johnson. Again, Ron Walters.

TAPE: IC: He reached the conclusion that many of the things the Civil Rights movement had done, many of the goals it had achieved, in terms of legislation, many of the programs that had been passed and initiated by Johnson, himself, could not be fulfilled because of the Vietnam war. He said, My imprimatur, before the Nobel committee, was that I stood for peace.' And he had to resolve that question as to whether the peace that he stood for was simply domestic peace, limited only to Civil Rights, limited only to blacks.

He concluded that he had a responsibility to speak out against war.

A nation already divided on the issues of race, gender and the generation gap became even more so on the Vietnam.

AMBIENCE: Les Sirenes,

On Sunday, March 31st, a visibly weary President Johnson went before a national television audience and delivered a political bombshell. LBJ told a stunned nation that he would not seek another term in office, throwing both the Republican and Democratic presidential fields into disarray. As a major proponent of Civil Rights, Johnson's announcement cast an even greater shadow on the future of the country's race relations.

PAUSE

A few days later, James Baldwin, the author of the acclaimed book, *The Fire Next Time*, spoke to a white interviewer about what he saw as America's explosive racial impasse.

TAPE: IC: Rage is happening. That's what's happening. And it's been happening for a very long time. People make a mistake when they think the opinions of James Baldwin, you know, because they've heard of him, are more relevant than the opinions of some black cat that you never have heard of and wouldn't speak to, if you did see him. Ralph Ellison told you a long time ago, long before I did, what it was like to be to be *The Invisible Man*.' And there's a long, long record, going back to the auction block, what we really feel, we, the blacks in this country.

On the night of April 3rd, 1968, Dr. King, was in Memphis, planning to lead a second non-violent march on behalf of 13-hundred striking black sanitation workers. The first march a week before had ended in violence, sparked, it was later learned, by those paid by local opponents. Asked to speak before a rally at the Mason Temple, the exhausted Civil Rights leader initially declined, but then changed his mind. King took the podium, speaking without notes, but with deep emotion, delivered what would be his final speech. With tears in his eyes, the minister spoke of his own mortality.

TAPE: IC: We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So, I'm happy tonight. I'm worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

AMBIENCE: I Say A Little Prayer For You,

The next evening, April 4th, 1968, a jovial Dr. King stood on the balcony outside his

room at the Lorraine Motel. He was getting ready to go to dinner at the home Rev. Billy Kyles. As Dr. King leaned on the railing, bantering with some of his lieutenants standing in the parking lot, a single shot rang out, striking the Civil Rights leader in his right cheek.

Some aides pointed across the street to where they thought the shot had come. Others scrambled up the steps to render first-aid to the fallen leader, who was bleeding profusely from his wound. As an ambulance was called to take Dr. King to the emergency room at St. Joseph's Hospital, the first urgent news bulletins of the shooting were transmitted across the world. An hour later, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was dead at just 39-years-old. A stunned nation held its collective breath, fearing what would happen next.

I'm Sunni Khalid for WYPR.

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