

"'68: The Fire Last Time,"

Narrated By Sunni Khalid

In Part 2, we look at the situation which Baltimore faced following the tragic news from Memphis.

On April 3rd - the day before Dr. King's assassination, one of Baltimore's afternoon papers, The News American, began a series of reports examining rising frustrations in America's urban centers, in what were then called, the Negro ghettos. The report, published in a newspaper that usually ignored issues of race, described what sociologists termed the revolution of rising expectations . According to the paper this meant when you get a little bit, you want more . Mike Olesker, a young reporter at The News American at the time, explains the way most white Baltimoreans understood the rising expectations of blacks.

The little bit was that blacks could use the tennis courts, the pools.

Indeed, expectations had been rising for several years - black Baltimoreans saw the incremental changes as not nearly enough.

"But remember the Maryland Bar Association just barely admitted blacks by a slim vote margin.

It was in this atmosphere of rising hopes and angry frustration that a match was struck.

Thursday April 4th, Senator Bobby Kennedy stepped off a plane in Indianapolis. Kennedy was running for the Democratic presidential nomination that year. The crowd who'd gathered to hear him speak was mostly African American. Standing before them, Kennedy delivered the tragic news from Memphis.

I'm only going to speak to you for a few moments I have some very sad news

The news of King's death spread across the country. In Baltimore, people spoke of a collective, mournful groan.

I remember walking into my dining room and my wife told me they killed Dr King and I cried like a baby. Cried like a baby bc when was it going to stop? They're killing the prophets - when was it going to stop?

Homer Favor was teaching Economics at Morgan State College. Rosalind Terrell lived on North Avenue and was a young mother with a 10-month-old son.

Anger - hopelessness - you know how you feel when you feel like you've had you're last

chance taken away from you? That's how it felt.

I remember there was an African American woman standing on the steps.

Jim Constantinides was a student walking through the campus of Loyola College.

She had tears in her eyes - and said do you know what this means? There's going to be hell to pay for this.

I remember I was in the pool room..

Little Melvin Williams was one of Baltimore's premiere hustlers.

"...and somebody came in and said they just killed Dr Martin Luther King All of a sudden there seemed to be more people in the streets.

You could feel the tension -

Lenny Moore, had just retired as a running back from the Baltimore Colts.

it was a question of what was going to happen - WHEN was it going to happen..

By Friday evening, riots had begun in dozens of American cities. In Baltimore, emotions were running high, but there was no explosion on the streets.

We were 24 hours behind other cities.

Reporter Mike Olesker ran to his paper.

I expected all kinds of action going on and there was the usual gentle lunacy and I heard Byron Roberts saying, Typical Baltimore Negroes I said what do you mean? He said, they're rioting all over the country why can't they do it here. His point was they had every right to.

Mayor Urges Calm - City Joins In Mourning reads the headline on the front page of The News American that Friday. It stated that Mayor Tommy D'Alesandro gave City Employees the day off to mourn and there would be a full statement at 4p.m. by City Solicitor George Russell, himself a Negro, according to the paper. Marvin Mandel, then Maryland's Speaker of the House, sums up the feeling among officials at the time.

I don't think it was anticipated that it would happen in Baltimore There was not that strong feeling, like in Chicago and Detroit. There was tension, no doubt, but I never thought it would lead to that explosion. The relations in Baltimore were a lot better.

Michael Olesker says Baltimore City's politicians thought they had reasons to believe they'd made at least some progress -

"Tommy said, No, I think we've established good relations here.' - he had a relationship with King. His father put up the first public housing project right across from Little Italy. Tommy had appointed the first black City Solicitor - George Russell - he made Marion Bascom the head of the fire board.

Tommy D'Alesandro ordered the flags flown at half staff to honor King and reported on the situation to Governor Spiro Agnew.

Even by that time Saturday morning - things were relatively calm. All the reports coming back were real good - I did mention to the governor that it looked too good.

By Saturday, the national death toll for the riots had hit 19. The headlines in the News-American that morning - captured the tense situation. Agnew Gets Emergency Powers, Maryland Guard Maintains State of Readiness. And then there was To Honor Memory of King - D'A [D'Alesandro] Asks Business Halt Monday.

In Baltimore - The National Guard, armed with bayonets and guns -- had been ordered by Governor Spiro Agnew to stay close. Agnew also requested federal troops be on call to move into the city if necessary. Mayor D'Alesandro made sure the police and fire departments were ready.

Commissioner Pomerlau was the police commissioner and General Gelsten was the head of National Guard. We went through the regular checkpoints of were we in good shape police-wise, firefighter-wise - were communications in place, in case anything happened? Was there anything brewing anywhere?

D'Alesandro also began calling on black leaders for their help. Criminal defense attorney Billy Murphy, then in his last year of law school, was living in Cherry Hill in south Baltimore at the time. His father, William H. Murphy, Sr. was a prominent member of the community.

Immediately blacks of significance and those of insignificance were recruited to keep the eruption down, but there were pockets of rioting going on that were quickly contained by the black leadership.

Murphy says there was some ambivalence at first.

There was some resentment doing the bidding of whites. But after the thought process matured over a day or two it became clear that this was in the interest of the black community to do this even though it was being initiated by whites.

Tommy D'Alesandro

My hope at that time was that if we could get to Sunday Morning when the ministerial alliances would be open for services - then we would have made it

"I don't think Sunday morning could have saved anything."

The Reverend Marion Bascom was one of the black leaders recruited by the Mayor. He was part of the self styled Goon Squad - a group of ministers and prominent activists who were part of the local Civil Rights movement.

- what they didn't understand was that Sunday belongs to a few worshippers - there are far more people in the streets on Sunday morning than in church Sunday would not solve the problem.

Bascom said it would take a lot more to alleviate the racial tensions building on the Baltimore streets. Simply delivering a calming Sunday morning sermon would not quell the growing rage of the city's black citizens.

Baltimore was a replica of what happened all of the country - New Orleans, Miami, Birmingham, Washington, Pittsburgh. It was a spontaneous outpouring of frustration and pain. It was not something that could be localized as a Baltimore thing. It was bigger than Baltimore. It was a nationwide thing

I always got the sense that everyone who was trying to do something were working in conflict with one another almost -

JoAnn Robinson was studying history as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins and active in the Civil Rights movement -

The mayor clearly tried to keep the emphasis on Dr King's death - they gave passes to some of the black leaders to stay on the streets and talk, but then the troops didn't recognize the passes and ended up arresting the men who had been asked to be out there to help. There was this desire to try calm things down and express grief, but with Agnew and the military mentality coming in, that just undermined everything positive that people were trying to do.

By Saturday afternoon, April 7th, Baltimore's racial divide was widening. Tommy D'Alesandro was beginning to see signs of trouble brewing.

They showed me a pamphlet that some were showing in the Gay Street area, but it was sort of threatening.

"My father had a business, Lewis Furniture Store on 700 Block of North Gay Street."

Ted Gammerman helped his father manage the store located in the heart of one of the city's main shopping districts

"The night or afternoon of the riots - people started coming by saying there was going to be trouble and this and that - you better clear out..they'll be working their way up here -

you better go home. And that's what we did around 4:30, 5:00.

Some time around five, a brick was thrown through the window of one of the stores on Gay Street.

By the time we got home they were rioting - on North Ave they were rioting started on Gay St but the whole city had problems. Then someone called us and told us the building was burning down that they had thrown a Molotov cocktail through the window.

The Lewis Furniture Store burned to the ground. Eventually, the family reopened in another location with donated stock.

We grew up down there. I went to school down there. I didn't think they should of went about burning down people who had worked there and lived there all their lives and had to start all over again but I can understand their frustrations too. They were frustrated and once people started doing something others followed suit.

It seemed a day just being white was the wrong complexion.

Melvin Williams spent a lot of time back in 1968 on Pennsylvania Ave on the city's west side most of the black businesses there, he says, were untouched but the stores belonging to whites were looted and burned. Many of the business owners were Jews who felt betrayed that their longtime customers had turned against them. But Melvin says the fact they were Jewish was irrelevant to the rioters.

This was because somebody white had just killed the biggest black on the planet. There was no way that those persons that were rioting were going to be able to decipher that these were Jews and the people who killed this man were not Jews but Rednecks not going to be able to disseminate the difference of whites period. We gonna destroy it.

Devon Wilford-Said was one of the many teenagers who felt they a right to loot the neighborhood store.

We had a market called crowns - a lot of people would complain because the people would sell us bad meats - the racist remarks we would receive when we would in that stores - we had a fixation of getting those people out of our community.

Fire alarms went off all night up and down Gay Street. Two people - one black, one white - burned to death in a blaze at Federal and Chester streets. The city moved to ban the sales of alcohol, flammables in containers, and firearms.

That evening. Some 6,000 Maryland National Guard troops, under the command of Major General George Gelston, entered the city.

There was an alert put out and we were told to report right away.

Wilson Thornton, Jr. was in the Guard. He says his unit met at the Pikesville Armory to gather weapons, ammunition, and canister gas.

And then we convoyed straight down Reisterstown Road and Pennsylvania Ave. When we got to Pennsylvania Ave and Biddle, the firefighters were down there putting out fires, people were looting, they were cutting the fireman's hose. They said we're glad to see you guys .

Speaker of the house, Marvin Mandel, was in the Virgin Islands when he got the news that the city was quickly descending into chaos. He hurriedly flew back to Baltimore.

As my plane flew in it looked like a castle being stormed. People rushing the castle and the town was up in flames.

Mandel rushed to the 5th St. Armory to meet with local officials.

We had to put a ban in - no one could walk across the streets at night.

The curfew on Saturday night went from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. The restrictions caused hardships for some and bruised feelings for others, like Rosalind Terrell.

I remember I had to show a pass to go to work and leave my neighborhood - and tho it was a security thing - it was humiliating to have to show a pass to come in and out of my own neighborhood.

JoAnn Robinson recalls the scene from her apartment in Charles Village.

We were at 2649 Maryland Ave and right up the street the National Guard set up an encampment - you just looked out your window and realized you were living under martial law.

Devon Wilford-Said remembers the curfew this way.

When that started with the curfew - they told us to come in around 7 at night - to try to keep the order - people were going chaotic - looting and beating people up. If they saw white people driving - they would throw rocks through the windows.

The city's jails were filling up - with looters and with thousands of people simply caught up for violating the curfew - many said they didn't know about the curfew. Colts football teammates John Mackey and Lenny Moore, headed downtown to the civic center which was being used to house curfew violators. Lenny Moore -

The temperature was rising - they were packed in there and you could see the police standing guard. And you could see well when is this thing - something is going to happen something is going to break loose - something is going to happen in this civic center - they would not let anybody go to the restroom - they gave them a cup and passed the cups

around to the men and ladies and they had to relieve themselves in the cup. They didn't want anybody to go to the bathroom and all hell break loose. And that was the situation when we got there. '

Inside the civic center, people were hungry too. Feeling that tempers would escalate into violence, the football stars took matters into their own hands.

Hold, just be cool. We're gonna get this straightened out - I said so boom we got on the phone.

Moore and Mackey called Esskay, a local meat processing plant in East Baltimore.

Something to get them food - lunch meat and to make quick sandwiches. We called the Blue Ribbon folks to get us bread. We called for ketchup and mustard - we ended making sandwiches for all those folks down there.

As for the bathroom situation, Moore and Mackey helped the police work out a system to take the detainees in groups.

Meanwhile, the officials gathered at the command center in the 5th Regiment Armory, it was clear that the curfew would not be enough to restore order. Marvin Mandel remembers there was pressure to take stronger measures.

They had the Attorney General of the United States was calling us because we had half of the 82nd airborne division sitting out on the highway - well the governor had asked for help from the federal people - and they were sitting on the highway and the Mayor was, of course, beside himself because this was a real tragedy in his city. He didn't know whether to bring in extra forces we got calls that said we couldn't let them sit there all night.

Mandel recalls that Governor Spiro Agnew was frustrated with the indecision. Eventually, Agnew went back to Annapolis and D'Alesandro did order the federal troops into Baltimore.

Mandel tells of one scene he saw on the floor of the 5th Regiment Armory, as the federal troops were preparing to deploy on Baltimore.

There was an Afro-American captain that was going out to patrol the streets. He said to his troops, If anybody is walking on the streets because of the curfew, you order them to stop. If they don't stop, you order them again to stop. And if they don't stop the second time - shoot them.' He turned around and looked at the press and said, Lemme tell you something - you see those men? They survived Vietnam and I'm not going to get them killed on the streets of Baltimore.'

And with those orders, Day One of the 1968 Baltimore Riots Became Day Two.

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