"'68: The Fire Last Time," Part 4

Sunni Khalid - Narrator

This week marks the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil unrest that erupted in 125 cities and towns across the nation, including Baltimore. The unrest in Baltimore lasted a little longer than three days but during that time, the violence spread over a thousand city blocks. It took the police, National Guard and federal troops and the tireless efforts of community leaders to end the violence. In that week, six people died, 700 were wounded and more than a thousand businesses were destroyed. In Part Four of our series, "'68: The Fire Last Time," WYPR looks at the aftermath of the upheaval. WYPR's Sunni Khalid picks up the story on Thursday, April 11th, 1968.

Fires were still smoldering when Mayor Tommy D'Alesandro learned that Governor Spiro Agnew planned a tongue-lashing for Baltimore's black leaders.

"I got advance notice of his speech from one of the TV stations, and I called him. I said, Governor, can you not make the statement or re-do the statement ... not call for a declaration of war with the black community?' Smoke is still present in the city. Let's just have a cooling off period.' But he said, 'Tommy, I'll tell you, that's how I feel and I am going to say it and I'm going to stick by my statement.'

Agnew had invited about a hundred of Baltimore's black leaders to a meeting at his Baltimore office. Agnew released a transcript of his remarks to the press ahead of time. Morgan State professor Homer Favor, worrying that he was late for the meeting, turned on his car radio and heard a reporter quoting the Governor's prepared statement.

I did not ask you here to recount bid for peace with the public dollar.

When Favor arrived at the meeting he saw spotted several friends, including Parren Mitchell, the head of Baltimore's anti-poverty agency, The Reverend Marion Bascom, and State Senator Verda Welcome.

"'Wait! This is a trap! I called Parren aside. 'Marion, I said, it's a setup. I explained to them that ... he's going to cuss us out.' And the cameras were up there, rolling. Verda Welcome says, No!' I said, Let's leave. Let's leave.' No. No. Let's stay and hear.' That's the only reason we stayed."

When white leaders and you ran.

The speech was laced with the kind of rhetoric Agnew would become known for.

At first, he made a distinction between them and black militants, like Stokely Carmichael, who had visited Baltimore three days before the riots. Agnew referred to them as circuit riding, caterwauling, riot-inciting, burn America down types. But then the Governor

Agnew castigated those assembled for failing to stop the violence. He accused the leaders-- many of whom had been on the streets appealing for calm -- of cowardice. Agnew said they were afraid of being called Uncle Toms.

"... When white leaders complemented you for your objective action, you immediately encountered a storm of criticism from the Negro community, parts of the Negro community. The criticism was born of a perverted concept of race loyalty and inflamed by the type of leader who is not here today - and you ran."

Most of Agnew's audience simply walked out before the governor was finished. Many were stunned, since he'd had a reputation as a liberal Republican. The Governor supported open housing legislation, for instance and school desegregation. But Agnew's vitriol that day didn't surprise the Reverend Marion Bascom.

Five years earlier, Bascom had been involved in demonstrations aimed at desegregating Gwynn Oaks Amusement Park, when Agnew was the Baltimore County Executive. When the two met face-to-face, some time later Agnew told Bascom.

"Every time I see you I'm repulsed by you.

Bascom had a simple reply.

"That's a problem you'll have to overcome.

By most accounts, Spiro Agnew WAS a moderate liberal in his social views. In fact, he was elected as Maryland's governor two years earlier, essentially on the strength of his support in mostly-black communities in Baltimore city and Prince Georges County. But any kind of civil disorder was deeply offensive to him. The mob, he believed, could never be allowed dictate to society.

Agnew WAS right about one thing, though. Baltimore's black leaders WERE agonizingly conflicted about the looting and burning. They knew it was damaging the black community and they tried to stop it. But they sympathized with the anger and despair. Homer Favor remembers a call afterward from his friend Jim Rouse, the developer of Columbia.

"'If I showed you a picture of one of your cohorts torching a building, would you believe it? Would you do anything about it?' I didn't know what to say. I respected him. I loved him. So, finally it occurred to me. I said: 'Jim, I'm sorry you asked me that. Because I feel unclean that I didn't burn down a building.' These people were protesting the brutal treatment that we got and I did not participate in it."

If Dr. King's death and the riot weren't devastating enough, black leaders in Baltimore saw the man who had berated them rising in the political firmament during the unrest. Agnew's tough law- and-order stance during the riot had brought him to the attention of national Republican Party leaders and Richard Nixon, the GOP presidential nominee that

year.

Agnew wasn't really on Nixon's radar before the uprising.

Peter Levy teaches history at York College in Pennsylvania and is the author of Civil War on Race Street: An Account of the Racial Unrest in Cambridge, Maryland.

Agnew gives this presentation to black leaders in Baltimore and there's wide reporting on it. And there's housands of letters pour into A's office and are 80- to 90-percent positive. He had distinguished himself by becoming the voice of the white backlash.

It was the beginning of the GOP's Southern strategy, aligning the party with political conservatives, many of them who had strongly opposed racial desegregation. Former Governor Marvin Mandel was Speaker of the House in 1968 and remembers how the selection happened.

Nixon had made an arrangement with Strom Thurmond could veto the vice-presidential candidate .all right with me..

That summer, months after the unrest, Agnew became Richard Nixon's vice presidential running mate.

Agnew called D'Alesandro to tell him the news.

"I said, That's alright with me. I didn't know ... that that was the end of my career.

D'Alessandro decided his political aspirations to be the next governor were over, because Agnew's mid-term departure meant Marvin Mandel, the House Speaker would succeed him in Annapolis.

"If I was going to run now, instead of running against a Republican incumbent, I would have to run against a Democratic incumbent."

So, Agnew, the law-and-order Republican moved up, and the progressive Democrat, D'Alesandro, was out.

Before leaving office, Governor Agnew initiated recovery efforts. He planned a new agency that would help rebuild the areas that burned. Most of these were never realized, although profound changes were in store for Baltimore and the nation, particularly for black Americans.

"The crime we see today is a direct result of Nixon's policies.

Billy Murphy is a former Baltimore City Circuit Court judge and longtime criminal defense attorney. He says the riots helped trigger the law-and-order backlash of the 70's and 80's .and a national criminal justice policy that helped put thousands of black men

behind bars.

I mean the numbers boggle the mind. In Baltimore, for example, 75-percent of all black men are in jail, or parole, or probation.

Murphy and many others also believe that the law and order policies of the 70s and 80s had a devastating impact on black families.

"When I was growing up, most black families were functional because the men weren't in jail. They were able to work and support their families, because the men weren't in jail.

Since 1968, thousands of black families in inner city Baltimore have suffered serious setbacks. In the 1970s, Baltimore's industrial base began to collapse. The massive steel plants, shipyards and auto plants, where many black Baltimoreans had gotten good jobs closed, ending many families climb into the middle class.

In 1968, the national unemployment rate for African-Americans, of both sexes was 3.6 percent. Forty years later, that rate has more than doubled to 8.3 percent.

As the unemployment rate climbed, drug trafficking and drug addiction helped fill the vacuum. The 1970s and 80s saw waves of drug epidemics nationally. In Baltimore, heroin and crack cocaine fueled an explosion in violent crimes, especially homicide.

All this is related to drugs

Homer Favor says he and his longtime friend Marion Bascom, despair over the impact drugs have had on young people in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

"Kids kill kids and I find that abhorrent, and so does Marion. But I can't curse those kids because they were put on the corner by public policy. Their daddies worked at Sparrows Point, Martin-Marietta, Armco Steel, Crown Cork and Seal. Where are those jobs now?

Still, the urban unrest of 1968 brought some positive changes. Michael Olesker, who was reporting for the Baltimore News American back then, remembers that community organizers had gained a new and persuasive argument. Some two years after the riots, he was reporting on a group of people, who were trying to get a drug treatment program in Cherry Hill.

"They got inside a board meeting of state officials. Here were these street guys, with nicknames like Butch' and Pissy.' -- smart guys, but who had turned to heroin in desperation. State officials said, We'd love to help you, but we don't have money.' And I remember, Nose' said, We're gonna find out how much money you've got and we burn down the shopping center and you do a study on why we burned we burned it down .we do have funds.

The riots brought change that sifted through government and society. Fairly soon after the

riots, the number of black city officials began to increase.

I couldn't have been a commissioner in 1968.

Former Baltimore Police Commissioner Bishop Robinson.

"I think we took advantage of opportunities and moved up in the ranks in fire department and other government agencies which had been prejudicial in their selection of employees. People began to see there's talent everywhere."

In 1971, William Donald Schaefer succeeded Tommy D'Alesandro as mayor. Bishop Robinson says Schaefer began to look for and groom young black leaders, including Robinson.

"He said 'You need to sharpen your administrative skills,' and I did. I honed my skills in administration and budgeting."

When Schaefer became governor he took Robinson with him to Annapolis as Secretary of Corrections.

Increased black voting power after '68 could make or break a candidate. Elected officials realized they needed to involve black people in every aspect of public life -- or suffer the consequences. Today, Baltimore's top four elected officials - including mayor, city council president, comptroller and city state's attorney -- are black.

Forty years after the fires of 1968, longtime Baltimoreans have different views about the impact of the riots. Writer Gil Sandler, who lives in Roland Park, says before '68, Civil Rights gains like school desegregation were already happening

Two years before brown v board polytechnic accepted African American students.

But after '68, Sandler says blacks and white moved farther apart.

So, it was divisive. Deep funk .choosing of sides divisive.

For Antonia Keane, the unrest in April 1968 was quickly channeled into greater civic activism in many city neighborhoods, but at a cost.

Baltimore's black leaders understood the frustrations that led to the riots but were deeply worried by the violence they unleashed. Reverend Marion Bascom is just as worried forty years later.

IC: "You ask me how I felt then. I felt hopeless. You ask me how I feel today. And though there are those who have made it, I still have a sense of hopelessness and helplessness because, until the nation decides to act grown up, and to put its energies on

education and housing, we can expect this to happen again."

Forty years ago today on the eve of his assassination, Dr. Martin Luthor King gave his final speech in Memphis. Alluding to threats against his life, the Civil Rights leader struck a confident tone about America's struggle for racial equality.

We've got some difficult days ahead we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

Dr. King might, with a measure of wonder, acknowledge the progress he and his movement achieved. But he might also renew his call for Americans, black and white, to proceed against poverty and violence and lingering discrimination with "the fierce urgency of now."

I'm Sunni Khalid, for WYPR.