

# 1965

## Watts Rebellion (Los Angeles)

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On Wednesday, 11 August 1965, Marquette Frye, a 21-year-old black man, was arrested for drunk driving on the edge of Los Angeles' Watts neighborhood. The ensuing struggle during his arrest sparked off 6 days of rioting, resulting in 34 deaths, over 1,000 injuries, nearly 4,000 arrests, and the destruction of property valued at \$40 million. On 17 August 1965, Martin Luther King arrived in Los Angeles in the aftermath of the riots. His experiences over the next several days reinforced his growing conviction that the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** (SCLC) should move north and lead a movement to address the growing problems facing black people in the nation's urban areas.



Frye had been drinking and was driving with his brother, Ronald, in the car, when the two were pulled over two blocks from their home. While Marquette was being arrested, Ronald retrieved their mother from her house. When Mrs. Frye saw her son being forcibly arrested, she fought with the arresting officers, tearing one officer's shirt. An officer then struck Marquette's head with his nightstick, and all three of the Fryes were arrested.

By the time the Fryes were arrested, hundreds of onlookers had been drawn to the scene. Anger and rumors spread quickly through the black community, and residents stoned cars and beat white people who entered the area. A neighborhood meeting called by the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission the following day failed to quell the mounting tension, and that evening rioting resumed. Firemen attempting to put out blazes were shot at by residents, and looting was rampant. All day Friday the riots intensified, prompting the California lieutenant governor to call in the National Guard. By Saturday night a curfew had been set, and nearly 14,000 National Guard troops were patrolling a 46-mile area. By the time King arrived on Tuesday, having cut short his stay in Puerto Rico, the riots were largely over and the curfew was lifted. Fueling residual anger, however, police stormed a Nation of Islam mosque the next night, firing hundreds of rounds of ammunition into the building and wounding 19 men.

While deploring the riots and their use of violence, King was quick to point out that the problems that led to the violence were "environmental and not racial. The economic deprivation, social isolation, inadequate housing, and general despair of thousands of Negroes teeming in Northern and Western ghettos are the ready seeds which give birth to tragic expressions of violence" (King, 17 August 1965). Although California Governor Edmund Brown hoped King would not go to Watts, King went to support those living in the ghetto who, he claimed, would be pushed further into "despair and hopelessness" by the riot (King, 17 August 1965). He also hoped to bolster the frayed alliance between blacks and whites favoring civil

rights reform. He offered to mediate between local people and government officials, and pushed for systematic solutions to the economic and social problems plaguing Watts and other black ghettos.

King told reporters that the Watts riots were “the beginning of a stirring of those people in our society who have been by passed by the progress of the past decade” (King, 20 August 1965). Struggles in the North, King believed, were really about “dignity and work,” rather than rights, which had been the main goal of black activism in the South (King, 20 August 1965). During his discussions with local people, King met black residents who argued for armed insurrection, and others who claimed that “the only way we can ever get anybody to listen to us is to start a riot” (King, 19 August 1965). These expressions concerned King, and before he left Los Angeles he spoke on the phone with President Lyndon B. **Johnson** about what could be done to ease the situation. King recommended that Johnson roll out a federal anti-poverty program in Los Angeles immediately. Johnson agreed with the suggestion, telling King: “You did a good job going out there” (Branch, 308).

Later that fall, King wrote an article for the *Saturday Review* in which he argued that Los Angeles could have anticipated rioting “when its officials tied up federal aid in political manipulation; when the rate of Negro unemployment soared above the depression levels of the 1930s; when the population density of Watts became the worst in the nation,” and when the state of California repealed a law that prevented discrimination in housing (King, “Beyond the Los Angeles Riots”).

After SCLC initiated its **Chicago Campaign** that fall, King asked an audience there: “What did Watts accomplish but the death of thirty-four Negroes and injury to thousands more? What did it profit the Negro to burn down the stores and factories in which he sought employment? The way of riots is not a way of progress, but a blind ally of death and destruction which wrecks its havoc hardest against the rioters themselves” (King, 12 March 1966).

### Footnotes

Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 2006.

King, Address at the Chicago Freedom Festival, 12 March 1966, **CULC-ICIU**.

King, “Beyond the Los Angeles Riots: Next Step, The North,” *Saturday Review* (13 November 1965): 33–35; 105.

King, Statement on Watts, 20 August 1965, **MMFR**.

King, Statement on riots in Watts, Calif., 17 August 1965, **SCLCR-GAMK**.

King, Statement to the People of Watts, Los Angeles, 19 August 1965, **MLKJP-GAMK**.

### Source

Watts Rebellion (Los Angeles), The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, [kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu)