

July 1967

T. Fulano (David Watson)

1987

July '87 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Detroit riots: the largest American rebellion of the century. Reactions to an early morning police raid on a ghetto after-hours drinking spot began with stones and bricks aimed at cop cars and quickly grew into excited looting within hours. The retreating police were eventually reinforced by 8,000 national guardsmen and 4,700 federal troops (82nd and 101st Airborne). The official body count after one wild week of looting, smashing, and burning was 43 killed, 657 wounded—at least 30 were slain by police or government forces. Rumors of snipers provoked troops to fire wildly at people, windows, buildings, and each other. Of the 682 fires, 412 buildings were destroyed. Over 1,700 stores were looted as whites quickly joined blacks in a true communal uprising. The number one song in the country that week was The Doors' "Light My Fire."

It was a full scale beggar's banquet, the return of the repressed, a surprise party. The city people, young and old, black and white, went through the pawnshop windows like laughing meteorites. Nervous exorcists, trembling before a mortal turned evil and massive and enigmatic, the politicians asked, "Who are you?" And like demons unleashed from an inferno, they answered, "Many."

How it burned! Ferocious and magnificent, in the conjured-up, premature, arsonist dawn. It was a small moment of truth: the plundered became the plunderers. Booze ran in the streets from the shattered liquor stores. Then the blood ran. The cops and the troops began their grim retaking of the city. Fifty caliber wasps swarmed against the apartment buildings, cutting through brick effortlessly. Tanya Blanding, four years old, was dragged away in the bullets' undertow, touch of Vietnam for the folks at home. John Leroy, gunned down at a roadblock, lay on the pavement in a spreading tarpaulin of his own blood. There was a shortage of snipers.

Today Detroit, feeble, decaying, sinks deeper into the vortex. More black politicians, now, and more black cops. Counterinsurgency has done its job. But the burden is heavier, the air thicker, the despair more giddy. The "riots," we are told, were a "tragedy." And they certainly were for the people murdered and maimed by the state. But the real tragedy is that the riots didn't spread, that they didn't deepen into full scale, conscious revolt. The tragedy is that since then, the real theft—of bread and dreams—has continued.

The tragedy is that so few looters ever learned the meaning of their festival, and started buying the new program on time. The tragedy is that it remained only a spree, and thus an escape valve. The tragedy is that so many have turned fatalistic, and have turned their backs on their potential allies and their faces to the wall. The tragedy is that there is now a surplus of snipers, and they've got no aim.

It was a binge, a saturnalia, a world turned momentarily upside down. It was a tremor, coming from deep recesses that some would prefer to wish away, to buy away, to machine-gun away. But it's still there, a shifting tectonic magma, rumbling, creaking, pressure building, and it won't go away.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/326-summer-1987/july-1967>
Fifth Estate #326, Summer, 1987

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