

City Ablaze

Harvey Ovshinsky

1967

On Sunday, July 23, at 3 o'clock in the morning, The Doors' "Baby Light My Fire" was the number one song in Detroit.

It couldn't have been more appropriate.

At 3:30 a.m. a large crowd of black people watched as their brothers and sisters were arrested for drinking in a blind pig.

At 4:00 a.m. they stopped watching and began throwing things. The rest is history.

As of this writing, 40 people are dead, 2,000 are wounded and 3,500 people are in jail.

It started with mass looting in the inner city, but soon spread quickly into other areas. It was black and white together as looters gave way to arsonists and arsonists gave way to snipers. Young children watched as their parents broke into hardware and grocery stores. When the paratroopers came in with machine guns and tanks the looting stopped. Not so much because the people were afraid but because there wasn't anything left to loot.

When the fires started on Sunday afternoon, Mayor Cavanagh asked that suburban fire departments come in and help out. Several times the fire fighters were forced to leave the area because of heavy sniper fire. At first the fires were limited to clothing, furniture and grocery stores, but on Monday the shit hit the fan.

Bands of arsonists left the ghetto and by late Monday many homes and businesses in Northwest Detroit were gutted by fire, as were many on the East and West side.

As this paper goes to press, over 1,300 fires have been set, 30 firemen wounded by sniper fire and everybody wants to know why.

Cries of 'outside agitators' fall on deaf ears for this reporter.

The looting was interracial and unusually cordial and friendly until the paratroopers began firing. Teenagers joined with black militants in arson and sniping. Six whites were arrested for firing on troops and while many deaths were blamed on snipers, the black and white residents of the ghetto say that the troopers were responsible for most of the killing.

In a discussion with *Fifth Estate* co-editor Peter Werbe, one black militant acknowledged that residents were arming themselves and in his words "getting themselves together."

Fighting between snipers and troops reached fantastic proportions as armed assaults were made on police precincts, command posts and even the downtown headquarters housing presidential assistant Cyrus Vance.

Bands of Negroes, armed with army machine guns kept two police precincts from functioning for almost an hour as they lay siege to them. Also, on several occasions guardsmen and police were forced to abandon entire sections of the ghetto due to sniper fire.

Not outside agitators. Just plain folk. Plain folk, some white, most black, who were angry at America. Plain folk who set Detroit on fire and made Watts look like a Love-in.



Harvey Ovshinsky
City Ablaze
1967

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/35-august-1-15-1967/city-ablaze>
Fifth Estate #35, August 1-15, 1967

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net