



A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination

Clay Risen

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A few hours after Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at a Memphis motel, violent mobs had looted and burned several blocks of Washington a few miles north of the White House, centered around the U Street commercial district. Quick action by D.C. police quelled the violence, but shortly before noon the next day, looting and arson broke out anew -- not just along U Street, but in two other commercial districts as well. Over the next several days, the immediate crisis of the riots was matched by an equally ominous sense among the nation's political leadership that they were watching the final dissolution of the 1960s liberal dream. For many whites who watched flames overtake city after city -- Washington, Chicago, Baltimore, Kansas City -- the April riots were an unfathomable and deeply troubling response during what should have been a time of national mourning. To them the rioters were little better than common criminals. But a look at the average rioter complicates such conclusions: they were primarily young (under 25) and male, but most made a decent salary, had a better than average education, and had no previous arrest record. In interviews and testimonies afterward, rioters recalled a sense of release, of striking back at the "system." To say that the riots meant different things to different people would be exceedingly trite if it weren't also exceedingly true. In ways large and small, the King riots solidified attitudes and trends that destroyed the momentum behind racial progress, fatally wounded postwar domestic liberalism, created new divisions among blacks and whites, and condemned urban America to decades of poverty and crime. This book will explain why they occurred, how they played out, and what they meant.

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