

Why didn't St. Louis burn?

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In the wake of the assassination of Dr. King on 4 April 1968, riots raged in 85 cities and continued into the next week, ending with more than 40 people killed, mostly African Americans, as well as 2,500 injured and 21,000 arrested.

While elsewhere in the nation, the violent reaction to King's killing was spreading, St. Louis was relatively peaceful and calm. Why? When the defender and supporter of peace had fallen, where were the militants and others who were torn apart by bitterness and a desire for revenge?

St. Louis today is considered by many a racially polarized and sometimes violent city, but why was it so quiet when Dr. King was killed? There were many public gatherings and solemn observances, and although crowds gathered, they dispersed peacefully. Why?

"We remained solemn but vigilant, for we knew what could have happened in St. Louis throughout that riotous and turbulent night," civil rights activist Norman Seay said.

"Those who wanted to start trouble were convinced by the greater majority that such acts would not be tolerated. Therefore, the evening passed without many serious incidents."

In 1968 Percy Green II was considered one of the major black nationalists and civil rights activist of the area. He said, "We had every reason for rioting but the area did not have the proper chemistry. Although St. Louis had more than its fair share of police brutality incidents, not one of those incidents occurred at a time to provide a 'perfect storm' to ignite a riot."

Johnny Scott, president of the East St. Louis chapter of the NAACP, said his city in 1968 had never been a disruptive place because of racial divisions. He said their problems were with St. Clair and Madison County officials.



He said, "Our city didn't have much to burn, because most of the businesses were owned by African Americans and the rabble rousers were not ready to burn down their own."

James Buford, president and CEO of the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, credited Norman R. Seay, Bill Bailey and Merdean Fields for calming the community by reminding them of Dr. King's legacy of peace.

"These prayer vigils, marches and rallies resulted in the creation of the MLK Holiday Commission," Buford said.

Former KATZ radio personality Doug Eason was on the air when the King murder was announced. He said he was not allowed to play the recording "Burn Baby Burn." Eason said, "Management was afraid the recording would cause an escalation of vandalism and violence, and episodes of civil disobedience."

Dr. King left an immense void in our community. Now we should wonder why some of our children are killing themselves and each other.

In 1965, only a few weeks before he was killed, Malcolm X said, "We didn't want anybody to tell us anything about Africa, and much less call us an African. And in hating Africa and hating the Africans, we end up hating ourselves, without even realizing it, because you can't hate the roots of a tree and not hate the tree. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself."

We must show that we are appalled at the killing that is taking place in our village and the depth of depravity of which some are capable. It must stop, and we must stop it.