



Lou Cannon. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD.* New York: Times Books, 1997. xxi + 698 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8129-2190-8.



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A Los Angeles Disaster

Lou Cannon displays his familiar journalistic skills in this impressive study of the Rodney King incident and Los Angeles riot of 1992. After an extensive career of writing about politics and the career of Ronald Reagan from Sacramento to the White House, Cannon relocated to Los Angeles as the bureau chief for the *Washington Post*.^[1] Cannon's skills are very evident in this study as he relies upon his contemporary reporting of the trials and riot as well as extensive interviews with almost all participants from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) participants and leaders to prosecutors, defense lawyers, judges, jurors, and Rodney King. Cannon's curiosity about people and his effort to present their perspectives enables him to offer a study on controversial, contemporary events that advances understanding. By avoiding excessive criticism and hyperbolic denunciation of individuals, institutions, and ethnic groups that characterizes much of the contemporary debate on this Los Angeles disaster, Cannon is able to present a coherent story and at the same time offer a persuasive thesis and critical analysis. Although the reader may prefer less detail at times and less repetition of similar accounts of the arrest of Rodney King and the multiple trials, the story

that Cannon presents sustains interest through the riot and is superior to other assessments.

In contrast to other assessments of the King arrest, first trial, and ensuing riot by observers such as Marc Cooper who wrote for the *Village Voice* and Mike Davis who reported on the events for *The Nation* and the *New Left Review*, Cannon devotes over two hundred pages to the King incident. Whereas Cooper and Davis portray the King incident from the videotaped beating during his arrest through the first trial in Simi Valley in which the jury acquitted the accused LAPD officers as a fairly common, predictable unfolding of events, Cannon offers a less deterministic perspective and notes much more contingency in his thesis of official negligence as the decisive factor.^[2] Cannon does agree with Cooper and Davis on the larger forces shaping the Los Angeles environment into a combustible cauldron, most notably the impact of the end of Cold War federal spending, the ensuing recession, the movement of middle-class African Americans out of South Central Los Angeles and Latinos in, and the failure of local and state leaders to address the escalating problems and tensions, emerging most visibly in ris-

ing unemployment, crime, drug abuse and gangs—the under class in the inner city that Mayor Tom Bradley could not bring into the benefits of his coalition and that LAPD Chief Daryl Gates aggressively attacked with Operation Hammer street sweeps of South Central rather than a community policing approach. Cannon also agrees with Cooper and Davis that the King beating was not an aberration: “variants of it had happened many times before but had not been recorded on videotape. Many police officers in the field recognized that it could have been them on the Holliday videotape....” (p. 107).[3]

In developing his thesis of official negligence, as well as private negligence by the media including journalists such as himself, Cannon moves from the videotape of the King arrest to explore a number of accumulating acts of negligence. Cannon tells a familiar story, but he presents familiar characters in a new light and provides new insights. For example, the tape that KTLA played and passed on to CNN and other networks that showed the LAPD officers striking King with their batons was edited by KTLA to remove a blurry ten-second segment which also deleted a preceding three second section showing King charging at Officer Laurence Powell. Neither the KTLA editors nor journalists such as Cannon who followed the arrest and ensuing first trial recognized the impact that this omission would have both on the public reaction to King’s beating and on the jury in the first trial when defense attorney’s made the most of the missing three seconds (pp. 196-97).

Negligence by officials with Chief Gates and the LAPD in the van receives substantial attention from Cannon. In his review of the LAPD, Cannon notes the evolution of the LAPD in “The Dragnet Legacy” but devotes the most attention to changes in LAPD policy on subduing resisting suspects, including a 1982 shift from choke holds that had killed fifteen suspects in seven years to the use of a metal baton rather than a swarm tactic of having officers drag a suspect to the ground. As Cannon bluntly points out, Laurence Powell had failed to demonstrate a proper use of the baton the evening of the King arrest. The supervisor told him to practice and sent him out on patrol as a training officer for Timothy Wind. “Powell was a uniformed accident in waiting and an example of official negligence at its worst,” Cannon writes, angrily describing this “sad comment on the professionalism of the LAPD” (p. 81). The ensuing maneuvering by Chief Gates to distance himself from the four LAPD officers heading for trial and the prolonged effort of Mayor Bradley and the Christopher Commission led by Warren Christopher to get rid of Gates receives detailed analysis

from Cannon who notes their shared false optimism that they had finessed the problem of excesses by the LAPD.

Judicial negligence is highlighted in Cannon’s assessments of Judge Joyce Ann Karlin in the trial of Soon Ja Du and Judge Stanley Weisberg in the Simi Valley trial of the LAPD officers. As Cannon persuasively notes, Judge Karlin never should have been assigned the Du trial as her first trial, a highly emotional murder trial involving the shooting of fifteen year old Latasha Harlins in a Korean owned market thirteen days after the beating of King, one of several shooting incidents in South Central involving Koreans and African Americans. Cannon suggests that several senior jurists ducked the controversial case, noting a conflict with planned vacations, and Karlin accepted the case in her second week on the bench (pp. 148-49, 169-170). Karlin’s decision to give Du probation rather than time in prison despite the jury’s conviction of involuntary manslaughter outraged the black community in South Central and exacerbated Korean-African American relations. Judge Weisberg also receives a critical portrait from Cannon who suggests that he never should have moved the trial of the LAPD officers to Simi Valley, since it was not outside the Los Angeles media area and the demographics of Simi Valley were slanted excessively in favor of the white officers and against King and the prosecution. Weisberg along with the prosecution expected an easy conviction with the videotape, according to Cannon, and Simi Valley was an “easy commute” for Weisberg (pp. 179-85).

Cannon’s evaluation of the Simi trial reveals less negligence by the participants, including the jury, as opposed to a defense that made effective use of the videotape coming and going, first, to exclude jurors who had seen the videotape on television and thought the police had used excessive force, and, second, to use effectively the deleted section of the tape that showed Rodney King charging Officer Powell. Cannon is far more critical of the failure of Chief Gates and the LAPD as well as Mayor Bradley to prepare for a possible reaction in South Central if the verdict was for acquittal. Assuming that riots did not take place in the day time and expecting convictions, Gates and Bradley neither cooperated nor prepared. They rejected a city-wide tactical alert; they failed to coordinate planning for dealing with a disturbance; and they avoided a show of force, such as allowing Metro to deploy in battle array, in response to Bradley’s and African American leaders concerns about a police provocation. As the verdict arrived in Simi on April 29, officers at the 77th Street Station watched the verdicts on television, and Chief Gates left for a fundraiser despite reports

of violence and televised coverage at Florence and Normandie. "Overall, the LAPD was shockingly unprepared for even a mild disorder, let alone a full-scale riot," concludes Cannon (p. 277).

Cannon, Cooper, and Davis agree on the outbreak and shifting nature of the Los Angeles riot. "In their origins, the riots were neither a gang conspiracy nor a revolt against harsh conditions but a cry of black rage," suggests Cannon who points out how the initial black participants indiscriminately attacked whites, Latinos, and Asians (p. 282). Cannon notes the targeting of Korean owned shops, the shift of Latinos from being victims to becoming participants on the second day as the media showed looting opportunities, and how the riot jumped around the city. Where Cannon differs the most from Cooper and Davis, who view the riot as an inevitable eruption that had to happen,[4] is in his detailed assessment of the outbreak of the riot. Cannon makes a persuasive case for possible alternative results if the LAPD had received proper leadership. When the robbery of a liquor store near the intersection of Florence and Normandie attracted outraged protestors and the few LAPD officers near the scene could not handle the eruption, the 77th Street lieutenant withdrew officers and kept them away from the spreading disturbance. In his office for three hours before leaving for the fund-raising meeting, Chief Gates failed to take charge; some 1,800 officers gathered at a command post but superior officers lacked the initiative to send them out against the spreading riot publicized by helicopter news crews; and when Chief Gates returned at 8:15 he spent another hour out of touch on a helicopter tour of the burning city. Cannon suggests that if the LAPD had responded in force to the outbreak and established a perimeter around the immediate area that, despite some casualties, the riot could have been stopped. In the chapter on the riot, "Nightmare City," Cannon very judiciously assesses not only the actions and inactions of officials but also the complaints of African Americans, Latinos, and Korean Americans over the failure of the LAPD to protect them, their property, and their communities as well as the efforts of individuals from all of these groups to rescue people being assaulted by the rioters as well as firemen trying to fight the spreading fires (pp. 303-46).

Although the drama of the story declines after the riot, Cannon persists in providing detailed coverage of the political fallout in Los Angeles, the Rebuild LA campaign, and three more trials including the federal trial of the LAPD officers acquitted in the first trial, several trials of rioters, and Rodney King's civil suit for damages

against the city and the LAPD defendants. Cannon maintains a fairly even-handed assessment on all of the participants, although he exhibits excessive respect for Stacey Koon, who supervised the LAPD officers at the arrest of King and failed to stop the beating. Cannon recognizes that separate state and federal prosecutions for the same offense are constitutional, but he clearly dislikes the political motives of the Bush administration in immediately launching a prosecution with all of the advantages of a fully-funded federal prosecution force (pp. 373-93). The reader may grow weary of more trials and similar testimony on familiar videotape of the same incident, but Cannon persists to a concluding chapter on "Judgements and Legacies" that offers a valuable overview to this substantial contribution on the history of Los Angeles in the early nineties.

Notes

[1]. For Cannon's trilogy, see Lou Cannon, *Ronnie and Jessie: A Political Odyssey* (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), *Reagan* (New York, 1982), and *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, 1991).

[2]. For Cooper's assessments, see his collected articles in Marc Cooper, *Roll Over, Che Guevara: Travels of a Radical Reporter* (New York, 1994), 155-173, 187-201, 243-256. Davis' evaluations include "In L.A., Burning All Illusions," *The Nation*, June 1, 1992, 743-746, "Who Killed LA? A Political Autopsy," *New Left Review*, No. 197 (Jan.-Feb. 1993), 3-28, and "Who Killed Los Angeles? Part Two: The Verdict is Given," *ibid.*, No. 199 (May-June 1993), 29-52. Davis uses a summary of these articles in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York, 1998), 369-391.

[3]. Cooper stresses the inevitability of the whole process in his review of Cannon's book for the *Washington Post*, March 1, 1998, "Book World", p. 7: "The beating handed out to Rodney King was hardly an aberration in the history of the LAPD. That such a beating would eventually get videotaped was an inevitability, just as the riots were inevitable. If the King incident hadn't set them off, another shooting at a Korean-owned liquor store, another highway chase of a black man, or something else would have."

[4]. See Cooper, *Roll Over*, 188-189, and Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 371-372, and Davis, "In L.A., Burning All Illusions", 743-745. For the Korean American perspective on the riots, see Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, MA, 1995). The authors interviewed fifty immigrants for

this study.

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