

The Flawed Emergency Response to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots (A)

In the middle of the night in early March 1991, white police officers from the Los Angeles Police Department beat a black man named Rodney King while trying to arrest him after he was stopped for speeding. A videotape of the altercation, taped by a nearby resident and soon broadcast worldwide, turned Rodney King's arrest into a national symbol of police brutality, and provided what most people believed was solid proof of misconduct by the four police officers eventually charged. More than a year later, as an almost all-white jury considered the evidence against the officers, Los Angeles awaited what almost everyone—including Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and most members of the Los Angeles Police Department—had concluded would be at least one or two guilty verdicts.

But on April 29, 1992, the suburban jury acquitted three of the four police officers of all charges in the case, and deadlocked on one charge against the remaining officer. The acquittals shocked Los Angeles and triggered outrage in the city's African American community. Neither the mayor, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), nor the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, however, appeared able to respond effectively during the early hours of unrest, and what began as an outbreak of anger and frustration quickly escalated into one of the deadliest and most costly civil disturbances in US history. During six days of rioting, desperate officials would ultimately call in not only thousands of California National Guard troops, but also soldiers from the Army and the Marines to quell the violence. The riots' grim toll—54 people dead, more than 2,000 injured, and damages in the county estimated at between \$800 million and \$1 billion—raised serious questions about how the city had been caught so unprepared, why local law enforcement officers had been unable to regain control, and why the mutual aid system that pulled in resources from the region and the state had functioned so poorly.

Behind the “Thin Blue Line”

When Los Angeles police officers arrested Rodney King on March 3, 1991, relations between the city's black community and the police were already strained—in fact, they had been so for decades. Contributing to this tense relationship, some critics claimed, was the unusual degree of autonomy that the LAPD enjoyed, causing it to become arrogant and to lose touch with some of the communities it was supposed to serve. Since an amendment to the City Charter in the 1920s, the job of police chief had been a civil service position. The chief was appointed by a five-member citizen Police Commission selected by the mayor, and could only be fired if that same commission

This case was written by Susan Rosegrant for Richard Falkenrath, Assistant Professor in Public Policy, and Arnold Howitt, Executive Director, Taubman Center for State and Local Government, for use at the Executive Session on Domestic Preparedness, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Funding was provided by the Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. (0800)

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brought charges against the chief, held a hearing to recommend dismissal, and if the City Council then ratified the decision.¹ While the charter change was made to insulate the department from the widespread political corruption of the time, the arrangement effectively gave future chiefs considerable independence from the mayor, the City Council, and other elected officials.

One of the first to capitalize on this autonomy was Chief William Henry Parker, who carefully nourished his own power base, and dedicated himself to building the best police department in the world. Under Parker, the LAPD won a reputation during the 1950s as one of the nation's most professional police forces, a status that was further enhanced by the LAPD-inspired TV drama *Dragnet*.² In particular, the LAPD was known for its topnotch technology, and for accomplishing more with fewer officers than many other urban departments—what Parker liked to characterize as “The Thin Blue Line.”

Yet the strides Parker achieved in certain areas of policing appeared to go hand-in-hand with a growing independence from—and, some claimed, contempt for—civilian control. In addition, the department's relationship with the city's burgeoning black and Latino communities was troubled. Although under previous chiefs the LAPD had been an early supporter of crime-prevention programs and outreach, Parker discontinued such efforts in favor of straight crime fighting. By the mid-1960s, the LAPD's mostly white force was known for aggressive policing that included stopping and searching individuals merely because they looked suspicious—a policy that in practice increased the perception that blacks were targeted simply because of their race.

By mid-1965, following several incidents in which police had clashed with black residents, tensions were running particularly high in the city's economically stressed and mostly black inner city neighborhoods. On August 11, the arrest of a black motorist by a white California Highway Patrol officer in Watts drew an angry crowd, and soon escalated out of control. The Watts riots that followed—six days of violence, looting, and arson—resulted in at least 34 deaths, 1,032 injuries, and a torched central Watts business district. Many observers suggested that more community outreach might have lessened the hostility and friction that ultimately erupted in the devastating civil disturbance. The LAPD leadership, however, focused not on prevention but on what it saw as its own flawed response, concluding that deploying massive force at the outset could have controlled the riot, and vowing not to make the same mistake again.³ Daryl Gates, an LAPD field commander during the disturbance, would later decry the LAPD's ineffective performance, and declare it unacceptable that the National Guard had to be called in to help the LAPD restore order.

After Parker died of a heart attack a year after the Watts riots, the LAPD attempted to improve its relations with the black community. Tom Bradley, a former LAPD lieutenant elected in 1973 as the city's first

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- ¹ The only charges that could lead to dismissal were high crimes and misdemeanors, insubordination, or incapacitation. No chief had been fired since the charter was approved.
 - ² Police Chief Parker cooperated directly with *Dragnet* producer and actor Jack Webb to create a show that both depicted a realistic crime fighting scenario based on real cases, and showed the LAPD to best advantage.
 - ³ Soon after, the department invested in two armored personnel carriers for use in possible future outbreaks.

African-American mayor, made it clear he expected full integration of the police department.⁴ In addition, Edward Davis, police chief from 1969 to 1978, instituted several community-oriented policing programs, including team policing—an approach in which officers were responsible for a specific neighborhood or section of the city. Davis, who believed the approach led both to greater commitment on the part of police and to greater cooperation on the part of residents, expanded team policing throughout the city in 1970. But although most observers believed the team policing effort helped cut crime and improve relations between the LAPD and minority communities, it was short-lived. Mayor Bradley, concerned that specialized units were pulling too many officers off regular street patrol, and new Police Chief Daryl Gates, citing cost-cutting pressures and a general lack of support for the initiative among the department’s rank and file, joined in dismantling the team policing approach.⁵ Under Gates, who was sworn in as chief in early 1978, the department again sought to emulate the model created by Parker—a professional and aggressive police force committed to doing more with less than any other big city department in the nation.

The LAPD and Rodney King

By the early 1990s, conditions in some Los Angeles neighborhoods were reminiscent of the period preceding the Watts riots. The city was experiencing its worst economic downturn since the Depression, brought on in part by deep cuts in federal defense spending and an exodus from the city of auto makers and other manufacturers. The impact of the recession was particularly severe in South Central Los Angeles, an almost 40-square-mile area encompassing Watts and other economically depressed areas of the city (see Exhibit A for a map of Los Angeles Police Department bureaus, including the area known as South Central).⁶ In 1990, more than a third of South Central’s 630,000 residents were living below the poverty line. Most families with the means to leave the area already had, depleting the black middle class that had served as a stabilizing force during previous decades. Arriving in their place were recent immigrants from Central America and Mexico, many of them illegal aliens. By 1990, Latinos accounted for 49 percent of the population of South Central, while blacks comprised 43 percent.

Violent crime and gang activity had risen along with unemployment, fueled in part by the crack cocaine epidemic of the mid-1980s. In an effort to get tough, Police Chief Daryl Gates in April 1988 had instituted Operation Hammer, an aggressive program to arrest gang members by conducting street sweeps through South Central. Operation Hammer, though, led to increased charges of police harassment and racism, as police stopped and searched many black teens just because they were on the street. Such charges increased later that year when 80 police, acting on bad information, raided four apartments in the belief that they were crack cocaine houses, ransacking the rooms and arresting 33 African Americans. Only one prosecution on a minor charge resulted from

⁴ Mayor Bradley had faced racism within the LAPD head-on, having struggled against the racial barriers of the 1950s to achieve the position of lieutenant within the department.

⁵ Some of Davis’s other community policing programs remained intact.

⁶ The city of Los Angeles occupied 479 square miles, and the county 4,079.

the raid, and the city eventually paid \$3.7 million in civil damages to settle cases brought against it from the incident.⁷

In certain respects, the LAPD had changed since the Watts riots. The once largely white force had become integrated in the wake of Tom Bradley's election in 1973, and the percentage of black officers had grown to approximate the percentage of blacks in the city's population. Yet many African Americans still believed that police were disrespectful of, or even abusive towards, blacks. Within the department, meanwhile, the goal of doing more with less had become a bitter reality. Like other city agencies, the LAPD had felt the bite of Proposition 13, a landmark state initiative passed in June 1978 that reduced property taxes by two-thirds, and curtailed the ability of local governments to raise taxes, thus severely limiting the local tax base available to support services such as schools, police, and fire protection.

Since the passage of Proposition 13, Los Angeles voters had approved only a few tax increases to support new hiring or equipment for the LAPD.⁸ Although in 1990, the department had a peak workforce of about 11,000—including almost 8,400 sworn officers—that translated to only 2.4 officers per thousand residents, an extremely low ratio for a major metropolitan area. Washington, D.C., by contrast, had 7.81 officers per thousand residents, and New York had 3.67.⁹ The standard patrol cars were also showing their age, and by the early 1990s, many LAPD cars had logged more than 100,000 miles. In addition, the department's once vaunted computer and communications systems had become outdated and inadequate, but neither the city nor the voters would approve the money to replace them. Indeed, in both 1990 and 1991, residents had voted down bond issues that would have provided \$230 million for a new LAPD communications system.¹⁰

In the early hours of March 3, 1991, California Highway Patrol officers pursued a speeding vehicle on the Foothill Freeway at the northern edge of Los Angeles, a chase that ended when the car screeched to a stop with its path blocked on Foothill Boulevard. The two Highway Patrol officers had been joined by three LAPD cars, an LAPD helicopter, and police from the Los Angeles Unified School District.¹¹ According to official reports, the car's two passengers quickly got out and lay on the ground as instructed. But when the driver, Rodney King, finally emerged

⁷ Lou Cannon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), p. 17.

⁸ Ironically, despite negative attitudes towards the police, residents from poor areas like South Central were more likely to support tax increases to pay for better police protection than were wealthier Los Angelenos, who were more insulated from the impact of crime.

⁹ William H. Webster and Hubert Williams, *The City in Crisis (2 Volumes): A Report by the Special Advisor to the Board of Police Commissioners on the Civil Disorder in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, CA: October 21, 1992) Volume 2, Appendix 15-16.

¹⁰ Cannon, p. 310.

¹¹ By the time the arrest was completed, there were 25 law enforcement officers present.

from the car, his bizarre behavior and spotty compliance with police orders led officers to suspect he was drunk, if not high on PCP (for a chronology of events leading up to the 1992 riots, see Exhibit B).¹²

LAPD Sergeant Stacey Koon, the ranking officer at the scene, quickly took control of the arrest.¹³ After King threw off officers who attempted to hold him down and handcuff him, and after darts from Koon's electric stun gun failed to keep King down, Koon ordered officers to use their metal batons. The violent and apparently unrestrained effort to subdue and arrest King after he charged one officer—in particular, the more than two dozen baton swings by Officer Laurence Powell, including a blow to King's head—sickened some officers at the scene. Yet the arrest probably would have triggered nothing more than a departmental review, except for one fact. The incident, beginning with King's charge toward Officer Powell, was captured on videotape by George Holliday, a resident in a nearby apartment building awakened by the sound of the sirens.

One day later, Holliday took his video to a local Los Angeles TV station, and that night, a 68-second segment showing the Rodney King beating was broadcast for the first time.¹⁴ Within hours, Holliday's video of the beating was the featured story in Los Angeles, and a lead news story nationwide, as public leaders and private citizens alike spoke out against the apparent instance of police brutality. The top leadership of the LAPD was similarly appalled by the content of the oft-shown tape. "To see my officers engaged in what appeared to be excessive use of force, possibly criminally excessive, to see them beat a man with their batons fifty-six times, to see a sergeant on scene who did nothing to seize control, was something I never dreamed I would witness," Daryl Gates later wrote in his autobiography, *Chief*.

Gates, who was horrified by the scene depicted on the tape, and who did not want the entire department tarnished by the incident, appeared to have concluded that the officers were guilty, and announced March 7 that they would be prosecuted. On March 14, just 11 days after King's brutal arrest, a grand jury returned indictments against Laurence Powell, Stacey Koon, and two other officers involved in the beating, Theodore Briseno and Timothy Wind.¹⁵ The disclosure that Powell appeared to have joked about the beating in a radio message afterwards, as well as the release March 18 of a tape transcript from earlier the night of King's beating in which Powell made a derogatory remark about African Americans, further fueled charges of racism and police brutality. According to a survey of registered Los Angeles County voters conducted a month-and-a-half after the arrest, 81

12 The drug PCP, or phencyclidine, had been known to give its users almost superhuman strength and the ability to ignore pain, making some suspects who had taken the drug particularly difficult to arrest. King later admitted to having drunk alcohol before the car chase, but was never proved to have drugs in his system.

13 Koon later testified that he feared a CHP officer who had drawn her gun would end up shooting King or being shot by her own weapon if he didn't intervene.

14 Holliday sold the tape to a local TV station after his district police station showed no interest in reviewing it. In the wake of the video fallout, both the LAPD and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department initiated formal policies to accept for review and possible action all tapes of law enforcement activity submitted by citizens.

15 All four officers were accused of assault with a deadly weapon and assault under color of authority. In addition, Koon and Powell were charged with filing false police reports, and Koon was charged with being an accessory after the fact.

percent of respondents thought the officers were guilty.¹⁶ In the months leading up to the trial, eventually set for the following March, public condemnation of the officers' behavior never wavered.

The Christopher Commission and Latasha Harlins

Even before the Rodney King beating, the relationship between Mayor Bradley and Chief Gates had been a cool one. The disclosure of the violent arrest, though, was a turning point. Bradley was deeply offended by the videotape and what it appeared to indicate about attitudes within the LAPD. While Bradley saw the entire incident as a dangerous blow to racial unity in Los Angeles, he also saw it as a chance to force Gates from office, and to bolster faltering support among his own liberal and black constituency.¹⁷ "It is no longer possible for any objective person to regard the King beating as an aberration," Bradley declared in a statement after the LAPD released the transcript of Powell's racist remark. "We must face the fact that there appears to be a dangerous trend of racially motivated incidents running through at least some segments of the Police Department."¹⁸

On April 1, 1991, Bradley appointed the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department to provide an unbiased investigation of the leadership of Gates, focusing in particular on policies, attitudes, and practices within the LAPD that bore on the use of excessive force. The goal, in Bradley's words, was to "restore the public's confidence" in the police.¹⁹ Chaired by Warren Christopher, then a prominent Los Angeles attorney, the ten-member commission interviewed Gates, other LAPD leaders, and hundreds of police officers, as well as law enforcement experts, journalists, and community activists. In addition, the group sifted through personnel complaints, and examined some 6 million transcribed conversations sent between officers in patrol cars and between patrol cars and headquarters.²⁰

One hundred days later, on July 9, the so-called Christopher Commission released its report. Among its recommendations were the appointment of an inspector general within the Police Commission; better officer training; beefed-up discipline—including expulsion—of those problem officers who had received repeat charges of improper tactics; and a fundamental shift in training, rewards, and culture to encourage community-based policing. Most eagerly awaited, though, was the commission's assessment of Gates. After concluding that the chief had failed to foster a departmental culture that barred excessive force or that sufficiently curbed and punished officers who broke that rule, the report recommended that Gates resign. In an effort to be diplomatic, however,

¹⁶ Cannon, p. 83.

¹⁷ Bradley barely won re-election to a fifth term in 1989. While supporters attributed the slim margin of victory to the fact that the mayor did not campaign aggressively, some critics said support among Bradley's liberal backers had eroded because he had neglected the needs of poor areas like South Central in his eagerness to woo affluent developers.

¹⁸ Cannon, p. 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

²⁰ After Bradley privately asked Gates to resign on April 2, then appeared on TV condemning his refusal to step down, Christopher almost refused to chair the commission—fearing that the eventual report might not be seen as impartial. An attempt a week later by the City Council president to effect a truce between Gates and Bradley resulted in a joint news conference at which both pledged to work for the good of the city. Their mutual animosity did not lessen, however, and they did not speak to each other for 13 months. Cannon, pp. 122-26.

the commission couched the suggestion obliquely in a proposal that the City Charter be changed to limit police chiefs to serving a maximum of two five-year terms.

Gates had already been chief for 13 years, and had begun to broach the subject of his own retirement. But the Christopher Commission report seemed to fuel his defiance, and he declared that only when voters approved such a term-limiting charter change would he resign. In addition, Gates rejected those among the LAPD's top leadership, such as Assistant Chief David Dotson, director of the Office of Administrative Services, who had spoken critically to the commission about both the department and Gates. Increasingly, the sense of being under attack appeared to cause Gates to turn inward, trusting ever fewer people within his own organization.

The chief did, however, begin to execute most of the Christopher Commission's recommended changes, including disciplining officers found to have made racist remarks, and aggressively investigating those charged with excessive force. Gates also addressed the charge that he needed to be closer to the needs of the community, putting seven of the city's most troubled divisions directly under his own command.

Events outside of the LAPD's control, however, were conspiring to ratchet up tension in South Central and other areas with significant black populations. In particular, the seething antagonism that had existed for years between the black and Korean-American communities was coming to a boil. Over the last two decades, Koreans had purchased hundreds of liquor and convenience stores in inner city and majority black neighborhoods abandoned by other merchants in the wake of the Watts riots. In 1991, Korean immigrants ran some 3,300 convenience and liquor stores in greater Los Angeles, and 350 stores in South Central alone.²¹ While many Korean-run stores prospered, armed assaults and shoplifting were frequent problems. Partly as a result, some Korean store owners had come to view all black customers as potential criminals, while African Americans complained of being charged too much and of being treated with contempt.

In March 1991, less than two weeks after the beating of Rodney King, a Korean shopkeeper shot and killed a 15-year-old black girl, Latasha Harlins, after a fight over a container of orange juice. The shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du, claimed Harlins was trying to rob her, but her version of the incident was not supported by the scene captured on the store's own security camera. Du was charged with murder, and, given the existence of the tape, which showed Du shooting an unarmed Harlins in the back of the head as she attempted to walk out of the store, most observers predicted a swift guilty verdict and a substantial prison sentence when the case went to trial.

The trial, though, did not conclude as expected. Although a jury returned a generally respected verdict of voluntary manslaughter, in November 1991 a novice judge gave Soon Ja Du a suspended 10-year prison sentence and placed her on five years' probation.²² The surprisingly light sentence, which many observers viewed as blatantly biased toward the defendant, not only exacerbated tensions between Koreans and blacks, it convinced many in the city's African American community that the US legal system was unjust.

²¹ Cannon, pp. 113-114.

People of California v. Powell

On November 26, 1991, less than two weeks after Du's controversial sentencing, the judge responsible for trying the Rodney King case made a surprising announcement. A change of venue from Los Angeles County had already been granted, apparently due to fears about the impact the trial could have on an already tense city, as well as concern that the police officers could not get a fair trial due to extensive pre-trial publicity.²³ Instead of moving the trial to an area untouched by city politics and outside of the Los Angeles media market, however, Judge Stanley Weisberg announced that the case would be heard in neighboring Ventura County in the largely white town of Simi Valley, a community whose residents included a high concentration of Los Angeles law enforcement officers.²⁴

For the four officers charged in *People of California v. Powell*, the new venue appeared to be a miraculous break. Indeed, the makeup of the 12-person jury ultimately seated on March 2, 1992, only confirmed the location's benefits for the defense. The members of the jury, all non-Hispanic white except for one Latino and one Filipino-American woman, almost uniformly revealed a conservative and pro-police orientation on their questionnaires. Nevertheless, prosecutors chose not to speak out strongly against either the venue or the jury pool, perhaps believing that the videotape was sufficiently compelling to overcome these obstacles. Nor did the media deduce or report that the change in venue had weakened the prosecution's chances. With the video of the Rodney King beating airing on an almost nightly basis, and public opinion polls showing that people from all sectors of society overwhelmingly believed that the police had abused their authority, convictions were seen as a *fait accompli*.

Almost lost in the predictions of guilty verdicts were the comments of a few black leaders who noted the dangerous similarity of economic and social conditions in South Central to what they had been prior to the Watts riots of 1965. Patricia Moore, a city councilwoman representing Compton, a city with a large African-American constituency south of Watts, observed that if the eventual verdict was seen as unfair, "this community, and possibly the nation, will see upheavals as never before."²⁵

On Thursday, April 23, 1992, after a twelve-and-a-half week trial, the jury in *People of California v. Powell* began its deliberations. Largely unrecognized, however, was the fact that the evidence before the jury was not as one-sided as many observers believed. Most media reports had glossed over the fact that King had only recently been paroled from prison after robbing a convenience store; had driven at dangerously high speeds while being pursued by the CHP; and had been drinking in violation of his parole, with a blood alcohol content several hours

22 Du also had to do community service and pay a \$500 fine and restitution to the victim's family for medical and funeral expenses. Harlins's enraged family refused to accept the restitution.

23 Critics of the change of venue noted that in recent decades, almost no trials were moved in California, and that the ubiquitous videotape of the beating made it unlikely that potential jurors anywhere in the country would be unaware of the incident.

24 Some observers later speculated that Weisberg, whose wife was ill, made the venue decision based on the fact that it was an easy commute.

25 Rene Lynch, "Minority Leaders Say Verdict Seen as Racist Could Blow Lid off Powder Keg," *Daily News*, April 5, 1992.

after the beating still well over California's legal limit. Because the prosecution deemed King an unreliable witness, in part because he continued to give conflicting accounts of the beating, he was not called to the stand during the trial. Moreover, while Officer Laurence Powell was known to have made racist remarks, and had been accused in the past of unprofessional conduct and of using excessive force, the other three officers were well regarded.²⁶

Ironically, though, it was the very videotape that constituted the prosecution's main evidence that ultimately undermined the case in important ways. First, the ubiquitous airing of the video had almost guaranteed a jury that was tilted toward the defense, since potential jurors who had already concluded from watching the video that the officers were guilty were excused from duty. Those jurors who remained, therefore, were automatically less receptive to the prosecution's evidence.

Even more important, though, the tape shown jurors was more complete than what most people had seen on TV, and, while still brutal, placed the beating in a broader context. Shortly after beginning to tape, George Holliday had shifted the camera, creating a fuzzy image for about ten seconds. The local television station that initially aired the video cut those ten seconds off, but in doing so, also eliminated three seconds at the beginning—a short but clear segment that showed King charging toward Officer Powell. The dropped segment was the only part of the video that indicated King had resisted arrest. Faced with the unedited video, jurors—already inclined to be supportive of the police and suspicious of the media's version of events—found easy to believe the officers' claims that the beating arose from difficulties in arresting a dangerous, erratic, and resistant suspect.

Preparing for a Verdict: The Emergency Operations Organization

Mayor Bradley and Police Chief Gates, like most others following the trial, believed that at least Laurence Powell, if not all the officers, would be found guilty of excessive force (see Exhibit C for a list of key players involved in the civil disturbance response). This strong belief in a guilty verdict, probably more than anything else, colored the city's approach and that of the LAPD in preparing for the trial's conclusion. If the jury ruled as expected, Gates and others reasoned, there was little reason to anticipate a major disturbance. "If we were not prepared for any one thing, we were not prepared for four not-guilty verdicts," said then LAPD Commander Bayan Lewis. "We did not plan for a worst-case scenario."²⁷

As director and deputy director of the city's Emergency Operations Organization (EOO), Bradley and Gates, respectively, were the leaders of the city's emergency preparedness structure. The three arms of the EOO—the Emergency Operations Board, the Emergency Management Committee, and the Emergency Operations Center—were charged not only with overseeing the response to city emergencies, but also with planning and training activities in preparation for a possible crisis (see Exhibit D for an EOO organization chart). The EOO had a

²⁶ Stacey Koon's reputation for even-handed professionalism, for example, was cemented in many officers' minds when he gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a black transvestite prostitute with bleeding mouth sores who had collapsed in the 77th Street police station. The man, who died despite Koon's efforts, was later found to have AIDS. Cannon, p. 28.

²⁷ Cannon, p. 264.

small permanent staff located in the office of the city administrative officer, and many city departments had one or two staff members devoted full-time to the organization.

The Emergency Operations Board, which reported directly to Bradley and was chaired by Chief Gates, was comprised of the general managers of eight agencies whose involvement was key to any emergency response, including the Los Angeles City Fire Department and the Transportation, Building and Safety, and Water and Power departments. Although only the eight general managers were voting members, board meetings were sometimes attended by dozens of department representatives. The board typically met once a quarter to consult on broad issues of coordination.

The Emergency Management Committee, on the other hand, chaired by Shirley Mattingly, director of emergency management and coordinator of the EOO, was a much larger group of staff-level representatives from all city departments—as well as some state, county, and non-governmental organizations.²⁸ The committee and its subcommittees met at least monthly to discuss practical and logistical aspects of planning, coordination, and response.

Finally, during a major event, representatives of the city departments involved in a response came together to coordinate operations at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), located in a sub-basement of City Hall East, across the street from police headquarters. Although the EOC was the emergency center for the entire city, responsibility for running it rested with the LAPD, specifically its Tactical Planning Section. Unlike the EOO, though, there were no staff permanently located at the EOC, nor were there high level officers responsible for managing the center. Instead, a cadre of trained officers at the rank of lieutenant or lower reported to the center whenever Gates or some other top LAPD official activated the EOC.

According to then EOO Coordinator Mattingly, the EOO ran a major exercise in the EOC at least once a year. In addition, the LAPD typically activated the center several times a year to deal with both planned events, such as the visit of a major dignitary, and the area's many natural disasters, including brush fires and floods. "Any time there would be an incident that would require coordination of more than a few departments, or that would be of a longer duration, we would activate the EOC to facilitate the coordination," Mattingly explains.²⁹

On paper, Bradley—as mayor and head of the EOO—shared responsibility with Gates for riot preparation and response. For example, Bradley, as director of the EOO and head of the Emergency Operations Board, could have asked that the EOO prepare an emergency plan specifically tailored to the trial. "Certainly, the mayor could have made a specific request," Mattingly says. "We were his organization." In practice, however, Mattingly says, the board and its staff were the experts on emergency preparedness, and Bradley counted on them, and on the LAPD, in particular, "to figure out what needed to be done and to do it."

²⁸ While the EOO organization chart listed the city administrative officer as the official coordinator of the EOO, Mattingly assumed that responsibility on his behalf.

²⁹ Shirley Mattingly interview with writer, April 7, 2000. Subsequent comments by Mattingly are from the same interview.

According to former Fire Chief Donald Manning, however, the Emergency Operations Board didn't convene any special meetings during the trial, nor did the board discuss in detail during a regularly scheduled meeting the possibility of a riot. Similarly, Shirley Mattingly says, there was no coordinated planning among the representatives on the Emergency Management Committee for how to train for a possible civil disturbance, or how to prioritize competing tasks. While in theory, the committee should have taken an active role in such planning, its efforts were focused on more routine earthquake and generic emergency preparedness, for which Los Angeles planners had won considerable recognition.³⁰ "The attitude in Los Angeles at the time was that we had been through the riots in the '60s, and as a society we had come a long way," recalls Mattingly. "There was no way that something like that, particularly racially motivated, could occur in Los Angeles in the '90s."

In any event, most observers say, the real responsibility for riot preparation lay with the LAPD, which would be the lead agency in any response. Gates, however, also failed to request a plan—either in his role as head of the board or as police chief. When questioned about the department's preparation, Gates claimed to have a plan to handle a possible outbreak. The so-called plan, however, was simply a 29-page segment of the LAPD Tactical Manual, written after the Watts riots, as well as the "standing plans" of each police division. By contrast, when the Olympic Games were held in Los Angeles in 1984, the LAPD had created a highly specific and successful plan for handling emergencies.

Preparing for a Verdict: The LAPD

As a few days passed without a jury decision, some observers, particularly within the black community, began to worry that the officers might be found innocent after all, and that such a verdict would set off angry and violent demonstrations. But even if Gates and the rest of the LAPD hierarchy had been convinced that such a disturbance was likely, other institutional factors lessened the ability and motivation of the top command staff to prepare.

Under the Law Enforcement Division of the California Office of Emergency Services (OES), law enforcement agencies could call on the state's mutual aid system for help if a situation escalated beyond their control, or appeared likely to do so. Gates, therefore, could have arranged in advance of the verdict to have backup forces alerted and available from a range of local and state agencies. State mutual aid was coordinated on a regional basis, and in the case of Los Angeles, such requests for help would have been handled through Los Angeles County Sheriff Sherman Block, the coordinator for Region I, covering Los Angeles and Orange counties.

It was a point of pride with Gates, however, that the LAPD could handle any situation on its own. The aversion to mutual aid, observers said, arose both from a sense of superiority on the part of the LAPD as well as the fear that other agencies would burden the LAPD with frequent requests for help. Even before Gates, the LAPD had a reputation for not requesting mutual aid. When the Watts riots first erupted back in 1965, for example, not only did then Police Chief Parker not ask for help, he refused the Sheriff's Department's offer of 300 deputies. The

³⁰ While earthquake planning included a small civil disturbance component, Mattingly says, it was not comprehensive

eventual deployment of the California National Guard to help control the riots had rankled some LAPD leaders ever since.

To make matters worse, Chief Gates and Sheriff Block, both of whom were often described as egotistical, had developed a testy relationship over the years. “Daryl Gates considered himself the chief law enforcement officer in the County of Los Angeles, but by law, Sherman Block, the sheriff, was the chief law enforcement officer in the county,” explains Bayan Lewis, then commanding officer of the LAPD’s Uniformed Services Group. “So there was this infighting between the two major agencies.”³¹ Richard Andrews, formerly director of the state Office of Emergency Services, recalls being at a meeting at the governor’s Los Angeles office earlier that year. “In an informal exchange that occurred just as the meeting was getting started, Daryl Gates said to Block, ‘Sherm, I can’t imagine a circumstance in which we would ever have to call on you for anything,’” recounts Andrews. “There’s no doubt that that irritated Block at the time, and the relationship between Block and Gates was already lukewarm at best.”³²

Internal problems within the LAPD also hampered preparation. Gates, facing ongoing pressure from Bradley and others to resign, appeared to have distanced himself from running the department, and had not met with his staff at all during April. Although the chief had not set a date for retirement, his imminent departure had transformed department dynamics, with some assistant and deputy chiefs disillusioned, others trying to win approval as possible successors, and others on their way out. Indeed, by the time of the jury’s deliberation, the leadership of the LAPD was in a state of near paralysis. “The general attitude was not to act decisively,” one critic later remarked. “The prevailing attitude was that if you don’t make any decisions, you can’t get hurt.”³³

Below Gates there would normally have been three assistant chiefs, who in turn oversaw nine deputy chiefs. But the assistant chief in charge of the Office of Special Services, which oversaw such groups as the Bureau of Special Investigation and the Drug Abuse Resistance Education Division, had retired the previous year, just days before the Rodney King beating (for an LAPD organization chart, see Exhibit E).³⁴ The post was still vacant due to a hiring freeze. Assistant Chief David Dotson, director of the Office of Administrative Services, meanwhile, had so infuriated Gates with his frank and negative comments to the Christopher Commission—faulting the chief’s leadership and complaining of an outmoded approach to law enforcement that often resulted in the use of excessive force—that Gates had reduced Dotson’s responsibilities, and the two no longer spoke.

This left only Assistant Chief Robert Vernon, who directed the Office of Operations, probably the most important office within the LAPD. While Vernon was on reasonably good terms with Gates, however, the assistant

enough to apply to a full-scale riot situation.

31 Bayan Lewis interviews with writer, March 27, 2000 and June 30, 2000. Subsequent comments by Lewis are from these two interviews.

32 Richard Andrews interviews with writer, March 27, 2000 and July 5, 2000. Subsequent comments by Andrews are from these two interviews.

33 Comment by Hubert Williams, former chief of the Newark, New Jersey, Police Department and co-author of *The City in Crisis*, an analysis of the police response to the riots. Cannon, p. 267.

chief had learned he wasn't among the finalists for Gates's job, and had announced he would resign in early June. To use up accumulated vacation time, Vernon left on April 24, with no replacement yet named, even though a verdict in the case was imminent. As a result, the office that oversaw almost 90 percent of police officers and detectives, including the Headquarters Bureau and the four geographical bureaus, was without a leader as the jury continued its deliberations.³⁵

Maintaining a Low Profile

A final factor strongly influenced the LAPD's level of preparation. Mayor Bradley and Chief Gates didn't agree on many things, but both had reached the conclusion that the LAPD should not make a public show of mobilizing. Gates doubted that violence would occur, but even more important, he didn't want the police to appear overly aggressive, given the nature of the ongoing trial and the recent criticisms of the Christopher Commission. This sense of cautiousness had already seeped throughout the department: LAPD arrests had dropped significantly during the previous year as police changed tactics and avoided problematic arrests that might lead to discipline or a charge of excessive force. "The feeling that, 'I get paid the same for not making arrests, and am less apt to get in trouble,' was almost a guiding rule," for both police and sheriff's deputies, recalls Los Angeles County Sheriff's Lieutenant Sid Heal, who remembers the period following the Rodney King beating as "the worst two years of my career."³⁶

Bradley and other black leaders, such as Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, and Congresswoman Maxine Waters, meanwhile, opposed a highly mobilized LAPD both because they feared police might overreact and create another Rodney King-like incident, and because they worried that the mere sight of riot-ready police could incite a violent reaction among already tense residents. "In the weeks preceding the reading of the verdict, we had received a huge amount of political pressure not to over-deploy," recalls Bayan Lewis of the LAPD.

While Bradley realized any verdict might spur some protests, he felt they would be best managed through outreach. As part of an effort dubbed "Operation Cool Response," Bradley planned to meet with church and community leaders at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Central as soon as the verdicts were announced. In addition, the mayor's office prepared "talking points" to guide community leaders and officials in dealing with the public. Finally, contingents from local churches were to spread out through the community to defuse tension.³⁷

Against this backdrop, those individuals within the LAPD who believed it essential to prepare for a possible disturbance faced an almost complete absence of departmental support. In the last weeks before his vacation and

³⁴ The retired assistant chief, Jesse Brewer, had testified before the Christopher Commission that Gates had mishandled discipline and provided inadequate leadership.

³⁵ Vernon actually returned the day the riots began, but when Gates refused his phoned offers of help, Vernon left for vacation the second day of the disturbance.

³⁶ Sid Heal written communication with writer, August 29, 2000.

³⁷ Webster and Williams, Volume 1, p. 19.

retirement, Assistant Chief Robert Vernon made an effort to increase police readiness. Vernon ordered tests of each bureau's field command post operations, and met informally with platoon leaders from the elite Metropolitan Division (Metro) in early April to discuss their needs and concerns. Metro, which included the LAPD's Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, as well as Crisis Negotiating teams for hostage situations, was responsible for aiding units and bureaus during civil disturbances and other emergencies. Its 233 officers would provide critical backup if a riot did break out. When the platoon leaders reported that their riot plans weren't current, Vernon directed them to revise their plans as necessary and to train for a possible "unusual occurrence."³⁸

On April 10, Vernon brought together high-level officers from the department's 18 divisions to discuss emergency plans, and suggested that the department declare a citywide tactical alert to coincide with the verdict's announcement. Vernon reportedly dropped the idea, though, after some of the officers complained an alert would be unnecessarily provocative.³⁹ The meeting's effectiveness was also probably lessened by Gates's directive to Vernon that the gathering and any subsequent riot preparation be hidden from the press. "Make sure they understand I don't want to put the LAPD in the position of predicting a riot," Gates instructed Vernon, according to the assistant chief's later account in *L.A. Justice: Lessons From the Firestorm*. As a result, most divisions not only kept planning to a minimum, they did not even inform officers throughout the division that riot preparation was taking place.⁴⁰

Lieutenant Michael Hillmann, whom Gates had recently named as interim commander of the Metro Division, was even more concerned than Vernon. Unlike most of the LAPD's leadership, Hillmann felt conditions were ripe for a riot, and he urged preparation for a strong but restrained Metro response in the event of a disturbance. On his own, he borrowed extra bullet-proof vests and helmets from another police force, worked out a tactical plan for Metro, and ran secret civil disturbance training sessions outside of the city during part of the week that the jury was deliberating.

But when Hillmann asked Deputy Chief Ronald Frankle, the commanding officer of Headquarters Bureau, in late April for permission to deploy Metro during daylight hours on the date the verdict would be announced, and to have the department's two armored personnel carriers on hand, the deputy chief turned him down. Frankle didn't want Metro squads armed in riot gear on the streets when Gates and other leaders had made it clear that the department should keep a low profile. Instead, then Commander Bayan Lewis, who oversaw Metro, scheduled the division to report at 6:00. Like most LAPD officers, Lewis believed that if riots occurred at all, they wouldn't start until night, as had been the experience during Watts and most other urban disturbances. Hillmann received another blow when he learned that a request from Metro the previous month to obtain non-lethal foam-rubber

³⁸ The careful wording reflected the assistant chief's desire to defuse potential criticism of police overkill.

³⁹ Representatives from three divisions, including 77th Street, the South Central area with the city's highest murder rate, didn't even attend the meeting.

⁴⁰ Cannon, pp. 268-270.

bullets for training and riot use had also been rejected on the grounds that the bullets were risky and insufficiently tested.⁴¹

Although Bayan Lewis had not pushed for a daylight Metro deployment, he, like Hillmann, took the riot risk seriously and tried to get the LAPD ready to respond. Lewis set up the department's emergency mobile fleet—four large vans that carried the communications and other equipment necessary to establish emergency field command posts.⁴² In addition, Lewis distributed a list of city gun stores to all 18 LAPD divisions, along with an advisory that warned officers to guard the stores if rioting broke out. Lewis also borrowed more than 300 sets of riot helmets and flak vests from the California Army National Guard, and asked a personal friend at Guard headquarters in Sacramento to unofficially alert leaders to the fact that if “things went bad” in Los Angeles, the LAPD might need help. The warning, however, appeared to fall on deaf ears. “They said, ‘Well if they call, they call,’” Lewis says. “And that was our contact with the Army National Guard.”

An Unexpected Verdict

At 1:00 on Wednesday, April 29, after seven days of deliberation, Judge Stanley Weisberg announced that the jury had reached its verdicts, and that the results would be read in two hours. The pause was intended not only to give reporters a chance to congregate, but also to allow police and other emergency agencies an opportunity to prepare. At the 77th Street Division in South Central, officers had been edgy and on alert all day, in part due to several threatening phone calls. A sergeant who wanted to alert Metro Division to the calls, however, was told not to do so since 77th Street's new commander, Captain Paul Jefferson, in place just four months, did not believe the calls were significant, and was intent on maintaining an air of restraint. The division's other captain was at a training seminar outside of Los Angeles, and the only other officer at the station with recent riot training was off for the day.⁴³

Within the last week, in a nod toward preparedness, Gates had approved \$1 million for police overtime in preparation for the verdict. But that Wednesday, the LAPD was ill-prepared for an emergency. Two-thirds of the department's patrol captains had begun a three-day training seminar that day in Ventura, almost an hour-and-a-half outside of central Los Angeles. In addition, despite knowing when the verdict would be announced, the LAPD decided the risk of trouble was too low to justify holding officers over at the normal shift change. As a result, almost half of the LAPD's 18 stations changed shifts at 3:00 without retaining extra officers, leaving 838 police on duty when the verdicts were announced, only about 150 more than would normally have been on duty at that time.⁴⁴

41 The LAPD would later approve the use of rubber bullets by the Metro Division. Cannon, p. 274.

42 As with the armored personnel carriers, though, the vans were not sent to likely areas of unrest ahead of time.

43 Cannon, p. 277.

44 The afternoon shift was the largest. Fewer than half that many officers were typically on duty during the day shift.

At about 3:15, the verdicts were revealed to a packed courtroom of astonished reporters. Except for a single charge against Powell of excessive force, on which the jurors had deadlocked, the four officers were acquitted of all charges. Chief Gates was probably as shocked by the verdicts as anyone else in the city, but he did not declare a tactical alert or take other immediate preparatory action, other than to activate the city's EOC.⁴⁵ Under the "activation," however, as one analysis later noted, "all that appears to have happened was the doors were opened, the lights turned on and the coffee pot plugged in."⁴⁶ Not until an hour-and-a-half later, at 4:45 p.m., did EOC personnel try to assemble representatives of the city agencies that constituted the Emergency Operations Board, who were supposed to gather at the EOC to coordinate the city's response to the emergency. "The EOC should have been in full operation when the verdicts were read," declares then Los Angeles City Fire Chief Donald Manning.⁴⁷

Gates's understated reaction to the verdict was mirrored by other top LAPD officials, none of whom stepped forward in the initial hour after the verdict to demand decisive action. At the 77th Street Station, though, where many residents in the surrounding neighborhoods had been hostile and belligerent all day, there was no sense of complacency. Lieutenant Michael Moulin, the watch commander, remembered telling the incoming shift that "...it was going to be a horrible day in the history of Los Angeles, a day on which many of them could well lose their lives."⁴⁸

Within minutes of the verdicts, angry groups began to form in the 77th Street Division and elsewhere in South Central. About an hour later, in an incident that would afterward be identified as the start of the riot, a group of young black men stole bottles of malt liquor from a Korean-American-owned store, hitting the owner's son in the head with a bottle and smashing the door as one man cried, "This is for Rodney King."⁴⁹ Mayor Bradley, meanwhile, appeared on television two hours after the verdict to express his disbelief and anger. "My friends, I am here to tell the jury...our eyes did not deceive us. We saw what we saw, and what we saw was a crime. No, we will not tolerate the savage beating of our citizens by a few renegade cops." Bradley cautioned, however, "We must not endanger the reforms we have achieved by resorting to mindless acts. We must not push back progress by striking back blindly."⁵⁰

45 President George Bush was reportedly stunned by the verdicts, and within an hour had begun looking at the possibility of bringing a federal civil rights case against the four officers. Federal prosecutors began presenting evidence to a grand jury on May 7; just eight days after the original verdicts were released. The resulting two-count federal indictment charged three of the officers with using unreasonable force, and Stacey Koon with failing to control the officers under his supervision. On April 17, 1993, two of the officers, Briseno and Wind, were acquitted, but Koon and Powell were both found guilty and sentenced to 30 months in prison, with a mandatory \$50 fine.

46 Webster and Williams, Volume 1, p. 106.

47 Donald Manning interview with writer, March 28, 2000. Subsequent comments by Manning are from the same interview.

48 Cannon, p. 280.

49 After the verdicts were read, protests and violence broke out in other locations across the country, including San Francisco, Las Vegas, Buffalo, Atlanta, and New York City, but none approached the scale or intensity of the Los Angeles riots.

50 Cannon, p. 284.

Bradley's strong words shocked many who were involved in the emergency response, and some claimed that the mayor had tacitly given approval to the people of Los Angeles to riot. "I think Mayor Bradley was probably the finest mayor the city of Los Angeles has ever had," says former Fire Chief Donald Manning. "But at that moment, his emotions got in control of his normal, very reserved self, and it added fuel to the situation." Philip Depoian, however, then special councilor to the mayor and a police department liaison, says Bradley's speech was appropriate, and that the mayor never regretted his words. "What he was trying to do for his citizens was say, 'Hey, I understand your frustration. I'm an African-American man, I'm a former police officer, and I saw what happened a year ago,'" Depoian says. "But this was a man of law. That was the basis of his life, and he would never have done anything that would inflame the situation."⁵¹

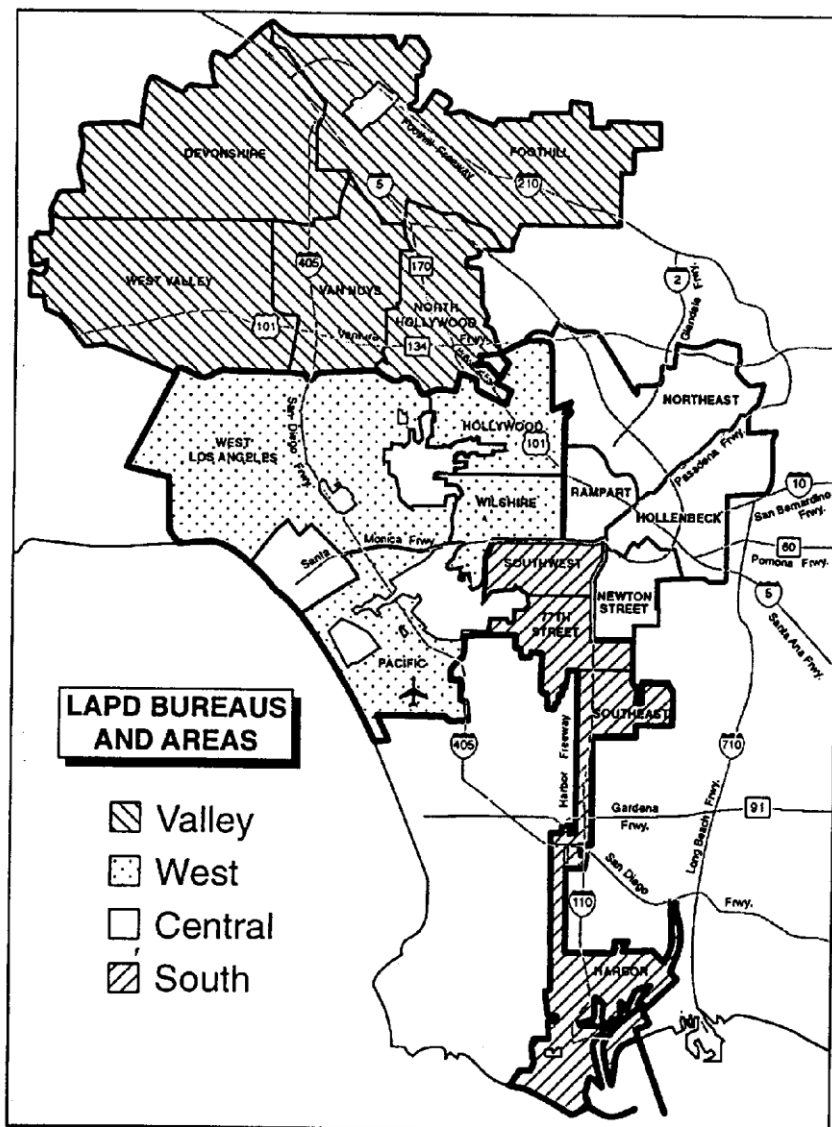
In any event, by 5:30, the sort of mindless acts that Bradley had cautioned against were well underway.

⁵¹ Philip Depoian interview with writer, April 19, 2000.

Exhibit A⁵²

Map of LAPD Bureaus and South Central Los Angeles

The area that comprises South Central Los Angeles—while not exactly defined—corresponds roughly with the LAPD South Bureau’s divisions of Southwest, 77th Street, and Southeast, as well as the Central Bureau’s Newton Street Division.



⁵² Source: William H. Webster and Hubert Williams, *The City in Crisis (2 Volumes): A Report by the Special Advisor to the Board of Police Commissioners on the Civil Disorder in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, CA: October 21, 1992).

Exhibit B
The 1992 Los Angeles Riots:
Chronology of Events

1991

March 3

Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers beat motorist Rodney King while arresting him for speeding. Resident George Holliday films the incident from a nearby apartment.

March 4

Holliday's video showing LAPD officers beating Rodney King is broadcast nationwide, spurring charges of racism and police brutality.

March 14

A grand jury brings indictments against the four police officers involved in the Rodney King beating.

March 16

A Korean shopkeeper shoots and kills a 15-year-old African-American girl, Latasha Harlins, after an altercation over a container of orange juice.

April 1

Mayor Tom Bradley appoints the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department—dubbed the Christopher Commission, after chairman Warren Christopher—to investigate LAPD policies and the leadership of Chief Daryl Gates.

July 9

The Christopher Commission releases a report calling for LAPD reforms and recommending the resignation of Chief Daryl Gates.

November 15

An inexperienced judge gives a suspended sentence to the Korean shopkeeper who killed Latasha Harlins, provoking distrust of and bitterness towards the legal system among the city's black community.

November 26

The judge who will try the case against the four police officers charged with beating Rodney King announces that the trial will be held in the pro-police and mostly white community of Simi Valley. Most observers still expect guilty verdicts against the defendants.

1992

Early April

A few officers within the LAPD run training exercises, order the updating of riot plans, and borrow equipment in preparation for a possible civil disturbance in response to the upcoming verdicts in the Rodney King trial. Such efforts are kept to a minimum, however, in order to keep a low profile and hide preparations from the press.

**Exhibit B (continued)
The 1992 Los Angeles Riots:
Chronology of Events**

April 29

3:15

The verdicts in the Rodney King beating case are announced. The jury has acquitted three officers of all charges, and deadlocked on one charge against the fourth officer. The verdicts spark immediate unrest and demonstrations.

4:15

Several young African-American men steal beer from a Korean-American store, attack the store owner's son, and break a door, marking the start of the Los Angeles riots.

4:45

Emergency Operations Organization staff begin to assemble representatives of the agencies on the Emergency Operations Board to coordinate the city's response.

5:15

Mayor Bradley addresses the city, declaring, in part, that, "...we will not tolerate the savage beating of our citizens by a few renegade cops."

Exhibit C

Key Players in the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

Los Angeles Police Department

Daryl Gates—Chief of the LAPD

Robert Vernon—Assistant Chief and director of the Office of Operations

Ronald Frankle—Deputy Chief

Bayan Lewis—Commander of the LAPD's Uniformed Services Group

Michael Hillmann—Lieutenant and interim commander of the Metropolitan Division

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department

Sherman Block—Sheriff

Sid Heal — Lieutenant

Los Angeles City Fire Department

Donald Manning—Chief

City of Los Angeles

Tom Bradley—Mayor

Philip Depoian—Special councilor to Mayor Bradley and police department liaison

Shirley Mattingly—Director of emergency management and coordinator of the Emergency Operations Organization

Warren Christopher—Los Angeles attorney and chairman of the so-called Christopher Commission, the

Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department

California Office of Emergency Services

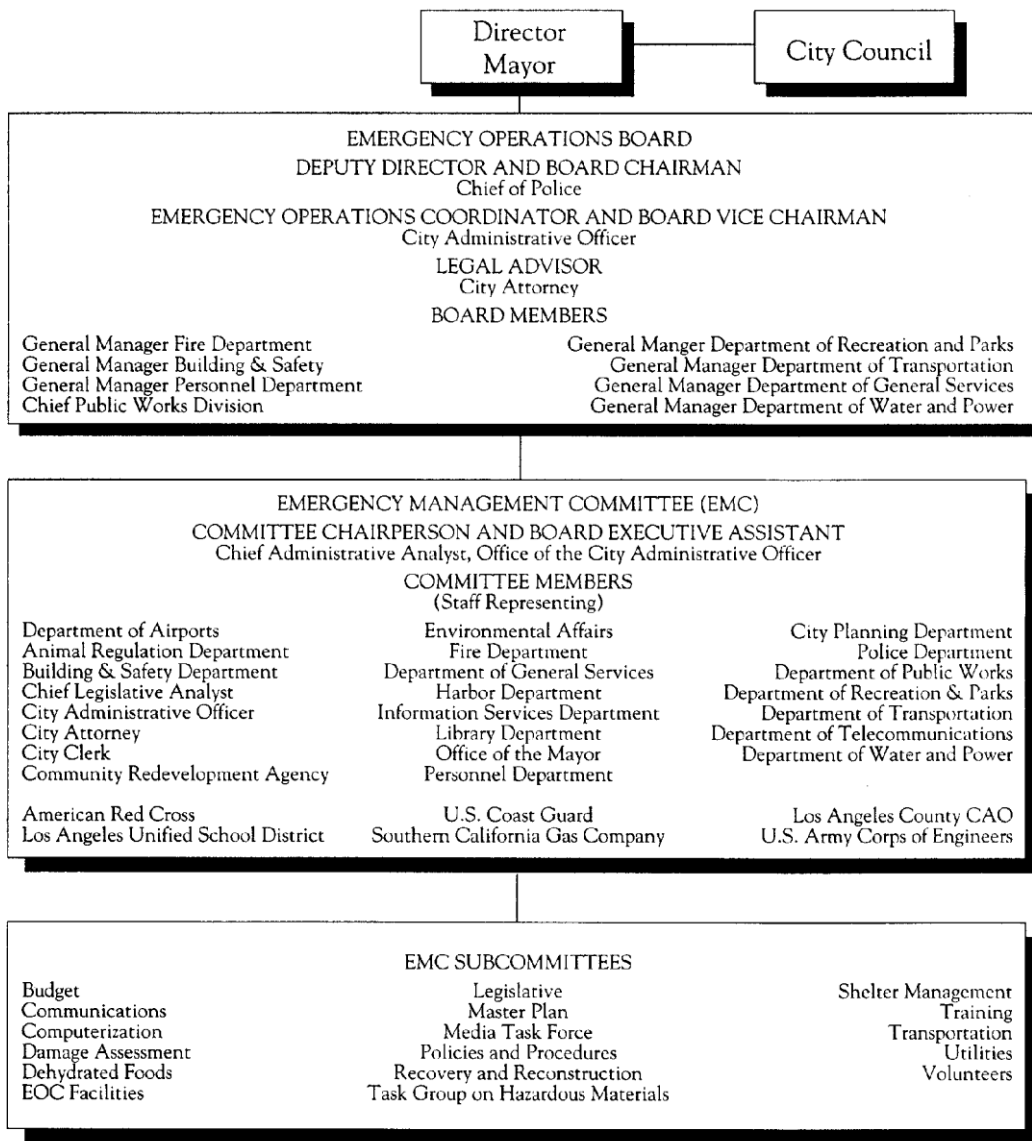
Richard Andrews—Director

Exhibit D⁵³

EOO Organization Chart

City of Los Angeles

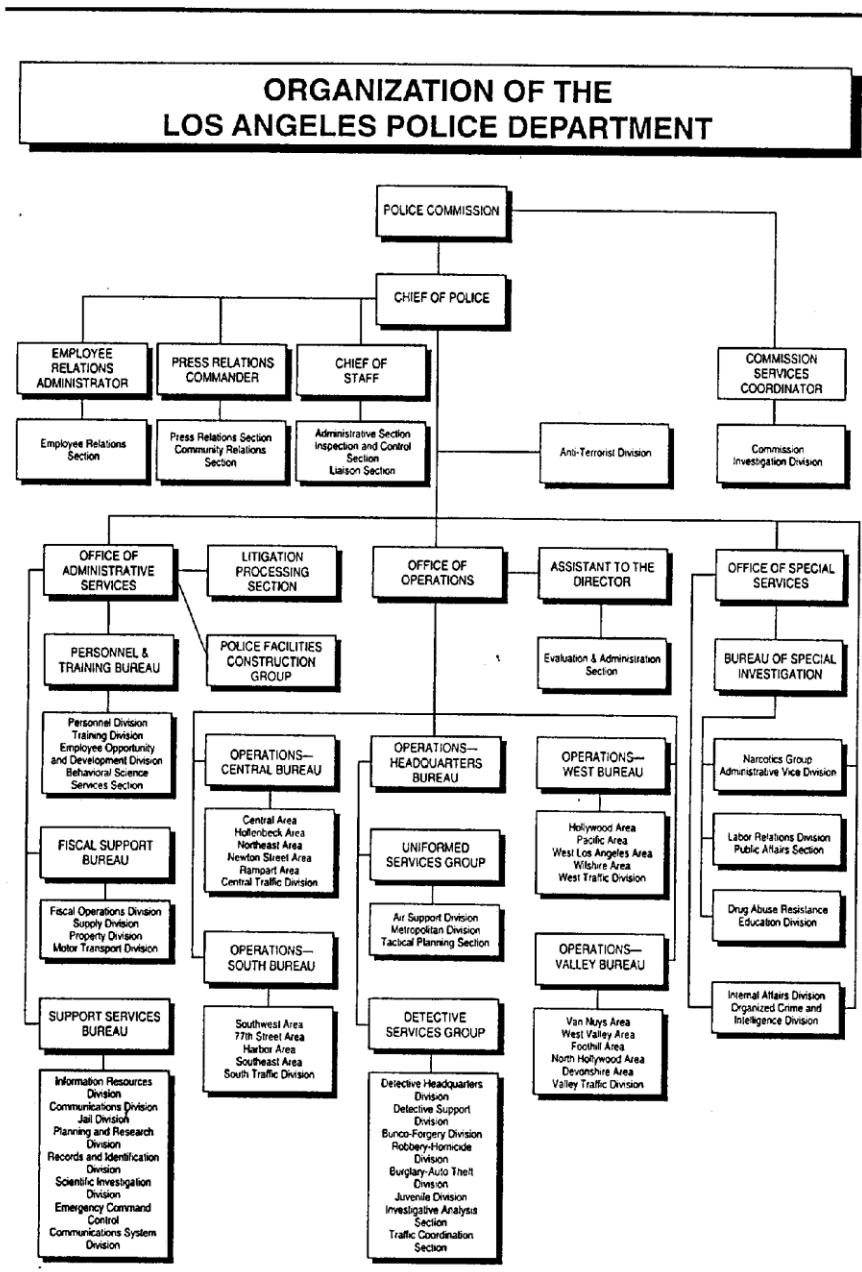
Emergency Operations Organization



53 Source: William H. Webster and Hubert Williams, *The City in Crisis (2 Volumes): A Report by the Special Advisor to the Board of Police Commissioners on the Civil Disorder in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, CA: October 21, 1992).

Exhibit E⁵⁴

Los Angeles Police Department Organization Chart



54 Source: William H. Webster and Hubert Williams, *The City in Crisis (2 Volumes): A Report by the Special Advisor to the Board of Police Commissioners on the Civil Disorder in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, CA: October 21, 1992).