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Causes of the McDuffie Riot

The McDuffie riot was a large-scale race riot lasting three days in the year 1980 that occurred in Miami and killed many, caused numerous dollars in property damage, and displayed the rage of several members of the black community. The outrage began after Arthur McDuffie, a black insurance agent, was brutally killed by the police. The officers attempted a cover-up for the murder and failed, leading to a court case where an all-white jury found the officers not guilty. The verdict shook Miami and was one of the main causes of the series of race riots that were full of anger and fury. Though the not guilty verdict may have been the last straw in terms of the black community's anger in the late 20th century, various accounts of racial discrimination and maltreatment, minimal amounts of political representation, and denial of economic assistance were all underlying factors that contributed to the McDuffie riot in 1980.

One cause of the McDuffie riot was the various accounts of racial discrimination and maltreatment towards black Americans living in Miami. An example of this discrimination towards the black community was the barring of blacks from many areas in the big city. In the third chapter of *Miami Now!*, titled "Blacks in Miami," Marvin Dunn and Alex Stepick explain that Miami had "restrictive clauses reserving for whites all land bordering Biscayne Bay and the Miami River and limiting blacks to a segregated quarter north of town, Colored Town, later to become known as Overtown" (50). The creation of this "segregated quarter" angered the black

community as blacks were forced to live in poverty-stricken areas that were inferior to the white living areas. One example of the maltreatment of black Americans at this time was when “Robert Owens” was arrested and charged for having a “concealed knife” (Dunn and Stepick 246). Instead of going to the police station, the cops brought him to a bridge that was under construction and proceeded to hang him naked, by his heels, on it. This blatant racism enraged the black community, displaying an irritation that grew larger with each unjust act. The fact that the black population was mistreated and segregated to a poorer area of Miami displays deep-rooted motives behind these riots. Being forced to move to a lower-class area that is devoid of “indoor plumbing” and containing “little or no running water” is extremely unjust and mistreating black citizens to the point of death shows how the policing system at the time was corrupt. As a result of these factors, it makes sense that the black community began building up substantial amounts of anger that initiated the McDuffie riot in the decades coming.

Another element that influenced the McDuffie riot was the minimal political representation given to the black community, allowing police officers to get away with unjust acts towards blacks. One example of this minimal political representation is in the seventh chapter of the book *Miami Now!*, when a black man named George Curtis got shot by police and “the police accused him of being a sniper,” which he was not, without evidence. In the trial, “an all-white jury found [Curtis] guilty of assaulting police, and he was sentenced to five years in prison” (Dunn 252). The appearance of an all-white jury was commonplace at the time, as black juries were not given the chance to decide on their inclusion. The exclusion of black jury members was already irritating, but the abuse of white jury power took it a step further. Another example of this is shown in chapter 7 of *Miami Now!*, where a black man named Randy Heath was subdued

and accidentally shot by a police officer that thought he was a robber. The black community was angry about this but became furious when they discovered that the officer was not suspended but instead given “a merit pay increase” (Dunn and Stepick 266). It is very unjust to think that killing a black man should not result in any punishment, let alone a pay raise. This event was important as it showed the black community that the police were corrupt and abused their power to exert their racist tendencies. Tension rose when the black community discovered that there was an extreme lack of representation in Miami. From white juries to police officers being let off the hook for punishable crimes, it is easy to see the source of the black community’s anger and it is an understandable source of irritation. These ideas echoed throughout the McDuffie riot as the unjust political system and corrupt policing were the last straw for the black community when the cops were declared not guilty after the murder of Arthur McDuffie.

Denial of financial assistance for the black community was a factor that had a leading cause in the McDuffie riot as well. In chapter 3 of *Miami Now!*, it was noted that “Between 1968 and 1980, the SBA cumulatively dispersed 46.6 percent (\$47.7 million) of its Dade County loans to Hispanics and 6 percent (\$6.5 million) to blacks” (Dunn and Stepick 52). That means that Hispanic citizens of Miami received approximately 40 million more dollars than blacks did, almost eight times the amount the black population received. This was infuriating as the black community was neglected in terms of financial assistance at the time, making black businesses economically unstable and leaving the black community deprived of monetary stability. In the New York Times article “A Year After the Miami Riot, Embers Still Glow,” Marvin Dunn and Bruce Porter look at “the side effects of racial integration in the 1960s.” During the mid to late 20th century, there was an influx of black immigrants and black citizens arriving in Miami, pushing the

community to find a way to incorporate the black community into the city. The authors explain that one effect of this “racial integration” was that it “destroyed a large number of thriving black enterprises” (Dunn and Porter 23). Here, it is shown that the black community’s businesses were unstable because of the segregation established in Miami. Obviously, discrimination targeted the black community in Miami before the 1980s, building rage from the lack of economic assistance. Even looking back after the fact, many realized that black businesses were bound to fail because of racial boundaries created in Miami. The theme of financial discrimination emanated throughout the events of the McDuffie riot, with various blacks fighting for economic equality.

To conclude, the events leading up to the McDuffie riot were that of a nightmare to the black community, irritating and enraging them more with each unjust act. From the corrupt policing to the outright discrimination and racism at the time, it is understandable why the black population was so outraged during the riots in 1980. These events were clear motivators of this anger, and all of them were at Miami’s fault, especially the killing of Arthur McDuffie paired with the not guilty verdict. Though we know that the murder of Arthur McDuffie and the verdict of the case were extremely vital moments in causing these riots, economic inequality, discrimination through maltreatment of black citizens, and denial of black political representation should not go unnoticed when speaking about the anger expressed by the black community on the days of the riots. The messages expressed throughout the riot-torn streets of Miami during the McDuffie riot will have an everlasting effect on the city, and they will continue to drive it into becoming a place of equality as a result.

Works Cited

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