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### Let The Fire Burn

The story of the historic bombing of 6200 Osage Avenue, a West Philadelphia residential block, in May of 1985 was captured by the 2013 documentary, “Let the Fire Burn”, directed by Jason Osder. “Let The Fire Burn” tells an emotional story about Philadelphia’s MOVE, a group of revolutionists, and their war against the Philadelphia police through the use of videos from the movement and interviews with MOVE members. On IMDB, there were differing reviews of “Let the Fire Burn.” One critic rated the movie a nine out of ten, praising Osder for his use of archival footage to push his message about MOVE. Meanwhile, another critic rated the movie a three out of ten due to their belief that the film project pushed offensive propaganda. This critic believed that the movie pushed pro-MOVE ideology by shaming the Philadelphia police, adding, “But what set those events in motion was MOVE...not the city of Philadelphia or its police force.” MOVE is a forgotten era largely due to its washing in Philadelphia history. Watching this film is important because it reminds viewers of how far we have come in the struggle against police brutality, and how much further we must go.

The name MOVE is not an acronym, it simply means what it says, to move, work, and be active(Piette). MOVE started as a religious sect in West Philadelphia that wanted to live in opposition to the reform world system(Williams, 100). They did this by adhering to guidelines, set by John Africa, MOVE’s founder, on how to live. In the documentary, one of the MOVE members expressed, “We see John Africa how people see Jesus Christ(Let, 7:50).” “The

Guidelines” written by John Africa taught MOVE members how to live, telling them to do things such as only consume raw food and to never indulge in drugs(Africa, 2). Children of MOVE were also not allowed to be taught how to read or write. Doing so, the children avoided being taught “synthetic education(Puckett).” Although MOVE attempted to live a natural life in their way, they were met with disgust by neighbors who turned to the police to form complaints and questions about child abuse(Let, 35:04). This led to constant harassment from the police, which sparked a decade long war between MOVE and the Philadelphia police.

MOVE originally drew inspiration from the Black Panther Party to create change in Philadelphia. Like the Panthers, MOVE helped out around the neighborhood. According to Puckett, MOVE members shoveled sidewalks and performed repairs for elderly people in the neighborhood. Additionally, MOVE also used demonstrations and protests to draw national attention. In 1972, MOVE protested the caging of animals at the Philadelphia Zoo, marking their first demonstration as a group(Tucker, 20). Many of their demonstrations were motivated by occurrences of police brutality in Philadelphia. In 1975, it was reported that MOVE had 38 demonstrations that year alone(Puckett).

In the thirteen years between the founding of MOVE and the bombing, three significant moments impacted the movement. All three of these moments were covered in “Let The Fire Burn.” The first moment that the film discussed was in late 1977 when police commissioner Frank Rizzo enforced a starvation blockade on MOVE. The blockade consisted of fifty-five days of no service from the city, including no food or water(Williams,107). Supporters of MOVE attempted to help MOVE during this time, but were met with harassment from the police. This moment eventually became a national discussion about whether or not this was a human rights violation. The next major event that was covered in the film was the compound raid in 1978 at

their Powelton headquarters. Frank Rizzo organized this raid where he said, “The police will be there to drag them by the back of their necks(Let, 22:50).” This raid led to a shootout between police officers and MOVE members, resulting in the death of officer James Ramp. Eventually, MOVE surrendered, sending out one of its members, Delbert Africa, where he was met with extreme force and brutally beaten as captured in the film(Let, 27:08). Williams inserted, “grabbed him by the hair and dragged him across the street, where two other officers joined in and started kicking his torso, face, back, and crotch area(111).” Injuries that Delbert sustained were intensive. He had injuries on his head, ears, and throat, a fractured jaw, and hemorrhages in his eyes(Williams, 111). Once all the MOVE members were removed, the Powelton headquarters was destroyed.

Nine MOVE members, including Delbert, were sentenced to life terms for the death of Ramp, despite the police being unsure which party killed the officer. Former Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode has gone on record stating that even he believes the officer was killed in friendly fire(Sullum). The trial for the members ended up becoming the longest trial in Philadelphia’s history(Williams, 112). These members became later known as the MOVE 9 with two of the members resigning from MOVE causing their charges to be dropped. Meanwhile, no officers faced disciplinary action for the beating of Delbert Africa. The impact of this event was so intense that in 2021, HBO followed up with a documentary titled “40 Years A Prisoner(Sullum).” This film looks much deeper into the events leading upto, during, and after the compound raid. It focuses around Michael Africa Jr., the only child survivor from the bombing and his fight to free his parents(Oliver). The last major event was the bombing on Osage Avenue, which made a lasting impact in Philadelphia history.

The most important part of “Let the Fire Burn” was dramatized through the use of archival footage from the day of the bombing. The film spent roughly the last fifty minutes recounting the events of the bombing on Osage Avenue. What set this chain of events in motion was an evacuation order passed by the city, forcing MOVE to vacate the premises for which MOVE refused(Williams, 123). MOVE stood their ground and protected their property as long as they could, leading to the inevitable standoff between them and the police. The final part of the film started with residents of Osage and neighboring blocks evacuating their homes. Williams stated, “over five hundred people were evacuated from 125 houses as the police suspected that gunfire might be used(123).” The film included multiple clips from news stations as well as interview segments from surviving members and city officials who were on the scene that day. Reporter Harvey Clarke stated that at around 6 AM, police pumped tear gas into the area that MOVE occupied(Let, 44:12). Officers that had negative history with MOVE were also allowed to take part in their evacuation. One of the officers that was active on the scene that day was Terrence Zagame, who was prosecuted for the beating of Delbert Africa(Williams, 124). Once the gunfire began, Clarke was forced to evacuate the area and end his news segment. During the gunfire, over ten thousand rounds of ammunition was fired into the MOVE residence(Williams, 124).

At 5 PM, the Philadelphia bomb squad placed an explosive on top of MOVE’s roof. The officer that composed the explosive was Officer Klein, who also had a history of harassing MOVE in front of their house(Williams, 124). At around 5:27 PM, the bomb exploded and a fire broke out. From there, it was a decision to let the fire burn, killing eleven of the MOVE members that were still in the house. Of the eleven, five of the deceased were children. Ramona and Michael Africa were the only two surviving members of the fire, with Michael only being

thirteen at the time. Ramona expressed, “My most vivid memory from May 13th, 1985, is the children hollering that they were coming out and being met with gunfire(Piette).” Once the bodies from the fire were found, it was discovered that the deceased members died from gunfire and not the fire(William, 124).

“Let the Fire Burn” also accurately dramatized the role of Frank Rizzo and the Philadelphia police in instigating the war against MOVE. Frank Rizzo was known for trying to suppress Black activists groups. In 1966, Rizzo led multiple raids on Philadelphia chapter houses of the local Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee(Tucker, 15). In 1967, Black students were protesting the desegregation of Girard College and Rizzo ordered officers in riot gear to break up the protest(Tucker, 15). At the protest, Rizzo was heard repeatedly saying, “Get their black asses(Chappell)!” Then in 1977, he ordered a raid on the Black Panthers headquarters in Philadelphia where he ordered for the Panthers to be stripped and searched in public(Tucker, 16). In 1972, Rizzo became the mayor of Philadelphia after successfully encouraging people to “vote white” in his campaign(Tucker, 16). From there, Rizzo was able to use city officials to help harass the new and active MOVE up until he left office. During his time as mayor, the U.S. Justice Department filed a lawsuit against the Philadelphia’s police department, saying officers’ use of excessive force “shocks the conscience(Chappell).”

The lasting effects of Rizzo mayoring has led to the removal of his statue in Philadelphia in 2020 during the wake of the Black Lives Matter era. Many journalists have drawn comparisons between Rizzo and Donald Trump as well. Blumgart wrote, “Both men are known for their outsized personalities, unfiltered rhetoric, hatred for the media and utter assurance in their own righteousness.” Before the removal, his statue was the target of multiple attacks during protests. Mayor Jim Kenney tweeted, “The statue represented bigotry, hatred, and oppression for

too many people, for too long. It is finally gone(Chappell).” Rizzo shockingly racist ways haunted the cities for decades, leaving the city with much to heal from

At the time of the bombing, Wilson Goode, Philadelphia’s first Black mayor, was acting mayor which led him to become the face of this tragedy. While in office Rizzo complained, “one of his biggest challenges was dealing with ‘Rizzo’s police’ whom he inherited(Williams, 123).” The only surviving child from the bombing, Michael Africa Jr., spoke to Goode nearly 30 years after the incident and said “All my life, I’ve been told that he(Goode) is the devil(Thompson, 134).” Over the years, Goode has repeatedly expressed constant regret in what happened the day of the bombing. Goode expressed, “Many in the city still feel the pain of that day...I know I will always feel the pain(Lynch).” Although Goode accepted responsibility for the bombing, this war between the city and MOVE is rooted in the evil treatment by former mayor and police commissioner Frank Rizzo. As mentioned above, Rizzo organized raids, blockades, and promoted extreme force against MOVE. These events were just part of a long resume of gross actions he took to mistreat minorities and people fighting for equal rights across the city of Philadelphia. “Let The Fire Burn” successfully criticized Rizzo for his impact on later events in the MOVE era.

Partially agreeing with the second IMDB review I mentioned, “Let the Fire Burn” inaccurately portrayed MOVE as a peaceful group. There was a brief part of the film where residents who lived on the same block as MOVE recounted MOVE’s use of their loudspeaker and how they would curse at them from the top of their house(Let, 32:58). MOVE’s next-door neighbor stated that some nights his wife would “just lay there and cry(Let, 32:38).” There were also instances of former MOVE members speaking out against MOVE. Former member and co-founder Donald Glassey testified in a conspiracy case that MOVE had plans to bomb hotels

and embassies around the world(Williams, 102). Glassey also testified that he was ordered to obtain military grade weapons to prepare MOVE for police assaults. In this case, Glassey pushed the idea that John Africa was mentally unstable. In recent years, former members have come forward citing instances of abuse. Malcolm Burnley of Billy Penn reported, “They cite coercive sexual relationships, child marriages, death threats, financial crimes, and several forms of psychological control.” Regardless of the message MOVE was trying to send, they were a general problem that Philadelphia needed to handle.

Another aspect that the film did not accurately cover was the aftermath of the bombing. The film did follow up with how the city reconciled with the survivors, but did not show what happened to MOVE’s neighbors following the fire. The only adult survivor, Ramona Africa, was charged with conspiracy and rioting. She was later sentenced to seven years in prison. Ultimately, the bombing affected more than just the police and MOVE. On top of the eleven deaths that was caused from the bombing, there were psychological trauma that innocent neighbors and bystanders were left to deal with. At timestamp 54:30, viewers can hear gunfire and see the destruction of an entire community(Let). Residents of the surrounding area had lost their homes and belongings in the bombing. Thompson added, “Sixty-one homes were burned leaving over 250 residents homeless(131). None of these homes were ever inhabitable again. Up until recent years, there was never an official apology for the damage that was caused in the fire. In the 1990s, MOVE members sued and were originally only compensated \$150,000. However, MOVE members and their families sued again and were each compensated \$500,000(Thompson, 132).

Another injustice that “Let the Fire Burn” did not cover, was until two years ago, MOVE never got to bury the members that died in the bombing. Up until 2021, the remains of the

MOVE members belonged to the University of Pennsylvania. The Philly health-commissioner ordered the remains to be destroyed, however in 2021 they were discovered in a box labeled “MOVE(Conde).” During the that time the remains were in the hold of Penn, the remains were the subject of a public online human remains course where they used the human bones as props(Conde). Once people became aware that the university still held these remains, protests erupted and Penn led an investigation into how the remains were mishandled(Conde). One of the findings from the investigation report stated, “The performance of the Medical Examiner’s Office was unprofessional and violated generally acceptable practices for pathologists(Tucker, 36).” This statement was supported by horrendous findings such as that the human bones were mixed with animal bones, bodies were stored at the wrong temperature, and the pathologists did not follow the systematic procedure for recording the finding of each body(Tucker, 36). As far as how the remains managed to get put in the possession of Penn, was simply answered by an anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Alan Mann. Although the report states that Mann would not agree to an interview, the report puts together on how Mann assisted in the loss of the remains. In early 1986, Mann had taken what was left of the identified remains back to his office at the Penn Museum to examine them. However, Mann eventually lost interest in identifying the remains and could not figure out what happened to the remains after he took them to his office. Finally in 2022, all remains were returned to surviving MOVE members or their relatives which prompted for proper burial.

Additionally, up until 2022, the city of Philadelphia stood firmly that the fire was an accident and that the MOVE members committed suicide by choosing to stay in the house. In 2022, the city finally admitted that the bombing was a homicide. The death certificates for all of the deceased members have been changed from accidental to homicide(Chinchilla). The city of



Philadelphia is also helping aid in the remembrance of MOVE. In October of 2023, the city revealed an exhibit in the lobby of the the city's Municipal Services building(Lynch). The exhibit is titled, "Remembering MOVE: May 13, 1985." The exhibit showcases the history of MOVE and includes news reports, public documents, videos, and books(Lynch). Former Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenny said, "My hope is that Remembering MOVE will inspire civic dialogue about Philadelphia's controversial past and strive to prevent such a tragedy from happening again(Lynch)." This just goes to show that the city is attempting to take the right steps forward to make amends with a community that they destroyed. However, it will take more than an exhibit and a few apologies to make up for eleven lives.

Again, watching this film is important to understand where we are as a society in the fight against police brutality. Many of the issues that MOVE faced in the 1970s and 1980s are still prevalent in modern society. The world has seen it in the summer of 2020 during the uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement, but Philadelphia specifically is still fighting police brutality. In 2020, Walter Wallace Jr, was killed by police after his parents called for help as he was undergoing a mental health crisis. Walter came out of the house with a knife in his hand and as the police told him to drop the knife, he turned away from them and was shot twelve times. All of this happened as his mother, Catherine Wallace, pleaded for them to not shoot(Williams, ix). Ms. Wallace also commented that, "They stood there and laughed at us." The death of Walter led to riots and multiple stores across the city being looted. More recently, Philadelphia officer Mark Dial was acquitted on charges after shooting at 27-year-old Eddie Irizarry Jr. six times while he was sitting in his car(Osborne). This sparked outrage in the Philadelphia community leading into a night of riots. In contrast to the riots, this incident also produced peaceful protests. ABC news reported, "About 500 people had gathered at a West Philadelphia park Tuesday night

and began marching peacefully through the neighborhood, chanting and demanding the names of the officers who opened fire.” The city of Philadelphia still has a lot to fix as far as their policing. Moving forward from MOVE is not meant to forget the history, but instead use the past mistakes of the city officials to make better decisions and not repeat history.

MOVE today is still fighting for change. Over the years, MOVE continued to fight for the release of the MOVE 9 and succeeded with the last member being released in 2020. Additionally, they were able to fight for the remains of their deceased members from the 1985 bombing to be returned to their possession. MOVE also continues to organize marches for social injustices around the city. MOVE also works towards making sure the city of Philadelphia does not forget their history. They hold an annual march to remember the lives lost on May 13th, 1985. Recent marches have been led by Michael Africa Jr, the only child survivor from the bombing. By sticking to their core values, they have continued to stay active in their community. They have been successful in pushing an apology out of the city and honoring their deceased members by getting their deaths ruled as a homicide. Supporters can find updates on the revolutionary group at [onamove.com](http://onamove.com).

Despite there being potential bias in the film, Osder did accurately portray the events of the bombing. Instead of jumping straight into the tragedy, Osder showed that the event was an effect of numerous events leading up to the bombing. Being able to find film from the blockade, raid, and the bombing allowed viewers to feel the intensity of the war between MOVE and the police. Additionally, Osder accurately placed the blame on Frank Rizzo and the Philadelphia police instead of entirely on Wilson Goode. The film did omit some important parts of the movement such as how the bombing affected the Osage community years after and how MOVE had to continue to fight for justice from the bombing. Although critics were right to question if

Osder was pushing pro-MOVE ideology onto his viewers, Osder still gave a well-rounded account of events in the movement. Adding perspectives from neighbors, city officials and news outlets aided in giving a full understanding of what happened in the thirteen years of MOVE. Being that MOVE has been written out of history, watching this film is important to continue to keep the history of Osage Avenue alive.

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