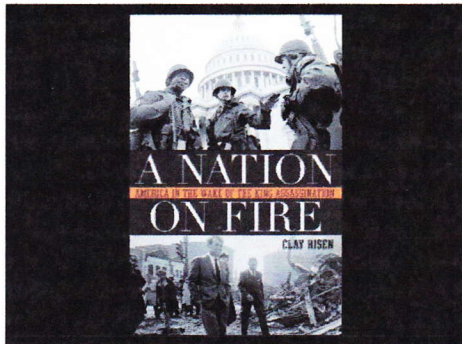




King's Death Left U.S. a Long Mending Before Obama: Book Review

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Review by Katherine Tam



Jan. 19 (Bloomberg) -- When new residents of Washington's gentrifying U Street corridor stroll through their neighborhood, they see black-owned businesses nestled between new condos, stylish stores and trendy restaurants.

Yet it was only 40 years ago that violence erupted in that area after the assassination of **Martin Luther King Jr.** In "**A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination**," Clay Risen describes how the riots devastated cities, strained race relations and polarized U.S. politics for decades.

Risen gives a gripping account of what happened in the hours after King's death and why President **Lyndon B. Johnson** seemed powerless to stop the violence. Using new interviews with the events' participants, Risen describes the uneasy relationship between Johnson and King, who were close political allies until King made a **speech** in 1967 opposing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

King realized he had to fight for economic rights to truly advance civil rights, and started his "Poor People's Campaign." He traveled to **Memphis** in April 1968 to lead local sanitation workers in their protest for higher wages.

The night before he was shot at a Memphis motel, King **told** a crowd that "only when it is dark enough can you see the stars." In the days following King's murder, Americans had a hard time seeing those stars as fires began raging in cities across the country.

Johnson was considering a broad package of social legislation at the time. He had already decided not to pursue a second term due to his unpopularity over the Vietnam War. But when the riots broke, he found much of his political agenda in tatters.

Violence Spreads

Within hours, federal troops were pouring into Washington. As violence spread across the city, Johnson and his staff were barricaded inside the White House, with sandbags surrounding Capitol Hill and Maryland police threatening to shoot any looters who crossed the state line from D.C.

New York's Republican mayor, **John V. Lindsay**, emerges as an unlikely hero. His close relationships with black community leaders and prompt visit to Harlem following King's death averted the rioting that wrecked other cities.

Risen casts a revealing and sympathetic light on the rioters, who were angry about King's assassination and deteriorating conditions in their inner-city neighborhoods. But he doesn't ignore the response of middle-class whites who fled to the suburbs in the aftermath of the riots.

Enter Nixon

The new suburbanites quickly became a political force. Their demands for more law enforcement and less government spending on social programs were soon heeded by Republican presidential candidate **Richard M. Nixon**.

The year was pivotal for another reason. Democratic presidential candidate **Robert F. Kennedy** was cheered by blacks for his impromptu speeches after King's death, for visiting damaged inner-city areas after the riots and for attending King's funeral in **Atlanta**.

By not mentioning that Kennedy was assassinated that June, Risen misses an opportunity to explain how King's and Kennedy's deaths in the same year tore Americans further apart.

Forty years later, there are signs that people are coming back together. On the November night that **Barack Obama** won the presidency, scenes of jubilation broke out on U Street. There were cars honking, cheering crowds pouring into the streets and couples kissing, not wanting to let go of one another.

"A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination" is published by **Wiley** (291 pages, \$25.95).

(**Katherine Tam** is an editor for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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