

## Walter Washington: The People's Protector

April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. What starts out as a seemingly normal day for all ends with an unparalleled amount of shock, distress, and enmity in black communities throughout the nation. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. affects many, including those of other races regardless of whether they agreed with him. Protesters take to the streets to express their frustration. Riots spark all over the country as anguish turns to rage in response to the cold-blooded killing of Dr. King. These ardent explosions of heartfelt emotion are ousted by black criminal opportunists wreaking havoc for fun. However one reacted, the death of MLK was a breaking point for people who had had enough of being treated unfairly. These acts of rebellion were black communities expressing rejection against police brutality, housing segregation, lack of jobs, lack of services, racial inequality, and many other disparities.

Walter Washington was an African American leader first appointed mayor-commissioner by President Lyndon B. Johnson from 1967-1974 and then elected mayor of Washington, D.C. from 1974-1979. During the outpouring of emotion and the chaos following Dr. King's assassination, portions of African American neighborhoods in the Northwest and Northeast of the city--from 14th street, to 7th street, to the H street corridor--were devastated. Ultimately, there were "900 fires, 1,097 injuries, at least 10 deaths and 6,124 arrests in the city"("Unifier Led D.C. Into Home Rule"). Washington rose to the challenge when his city needed him most, taking a proactive role bringing the community back together. As the *Washington Post* reported at the time, "During the rioting, the mayor seemed to be everywhere, consulting with the White House and reassuring residents"("Unifier Led D.C. Into Home Rule"). In addition to persuading looters to go home, Washington eventually faced down FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who reportedly pressed the mayor to issue a general order allowing the police to shoot looters ("Reporter chronicles 1968 chaos of DC riots," WTOP). Washington firmly believed that lives were more important than property.

Instead of granting permission for police officers to openly commit brutality toward the city's citizens, Mayor Washington made the bold decision to take a stand against police brutality and in support of the people in a crisis that was nearly out of control. These issues went deeper than the riots following Dr. King's assassination. "Police mistreatment of black citizens became an explosive social issue in the 1960's as crime spiked in Washington and other urban areas"(Chocolate City, pg. 352 ). Meanwhile, the annual "number of murders in D.C. jumped from 81 to 278 between 1960 and 1969, while the violent crime rate nearly quadrupled, according to the FBI" (Chocolate City, pg. 352 ). Mayor Washington's decision

to prioritize the people who he represented over the city was seen as questionable by some. However, it was a courageous act to overcome hatred against the city's residents. Mayor Washington's call to peace and justice in the midst of the riot came soon after an important speech by John F. Kennedy's brother, Robert F. Kennedy. Following Dr. King's assassination, Kennedy announced the traumatic news to a crowd including many African Americans in Indiana. "What we need in the United States is not division, what we need in America is not hatred, not violence and lawlessness, but love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and the feeling of justice towards those who still suffer whether they be white or they be black." He continued, "We have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond, to get beyond these rather difficult times"(Robert F. Kennedy 1968). Washington put these beliefs into action in D.C. As a result of his courageous actions, "Washington's performance in the crisis enhanced his credentials as a leader and silenced skeptics on Capitol Hill and elsewhere who had questioned the ability of an African American to lead the city." (Unifier Led D.C. Into Home Rule. Washington Post 2003.)

Washington's support of DC residents during the riot connected to his larger effort to combat inequality in the city. Several years earlier in 1961, "President John F. Kennedy had named Washington the executive director of the National Capitol Housing Authority."(George Washington Library Archives) In this influential position, Washington "provided low-rent housing in the District of Columbia by slum clearance"(Home Rule Act, 1974). Then, during his tenure as Mayor-Commissioner in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Washington advocated and received home rule for the District. Residents could consequently vote for their mayor in 1973, which meant that their voices and needs would be represented. Washington also "transformed the face of D.C. government, placing blacks in positions previously held only by whites and extending city services to previously neglected neighborhoods" and "improving police relations in inner-city communities"("Unifier Led D.C. Into Home Rule"). This meant that the black community's needs were better represented and respected.

In the U.S. today, we have inequality, disharmony, racial injustice and divisions. In the national capital, we have uncertainty about whether the U.S. will be a peaceful nation or a broken one. In spite of all those challenges, as Robert Kennedy said, "the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land."(Kennedy). I believe that Washington's courageous contribution agrees with the statement Kennedy made. He would want us to pursue caring for people with no regard to their race, because at the end of the day we are all human so there is no need for meaningless slaughter.

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