

An analysis of the situations revolving the death and murder of Freddie Gray by Baltimore City police officers from the perspective of my father, Leo Coleman, in comparison to the Riots of '68.

# Why Are They So Mad?

An interview by Aaron Leonard Coleman. HIST112.001

Aaron Coleman

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## Baltimore Riots

On the evening of April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray was arrested on unclear gun charges. He was taken into custody and thrown in the back of what locals call a “Patty Wagon” (pretty much a police van which is capable of securing multiple persons after arrest). The van made multiple stops on its way to the precinct, and upon arriving to the precinct Freddie Gray was unresponsive.

Viral video of the actual arrest showed Freddie Gray being apprehended by three officers, not resisting with force, but screaming. He was being held down, then you see three officers escorting Gray to the Patty Wagon appearing to be struggling with a broken leg. The officers made multiple stops before Gray was taken to the precinct and at each stop the officers failed to medically assist him. When they’d gotten to the precinct, Gray was reported unresponsive with a partially severed spinal injury and a broken leg. He was reportedly in a coma and had to be taken to the University of Maryland Shock Trauma Center. He died a week later suffering from blunt force trauma to his spinal cord.

Time and time again almost consistently after the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and the acquittal from second-degree murder charges of George Zimmerman, who wasn’t even officer if I might say, in 2013, the world has seen countless cases of young black men and women murdered by officers without conviction. The unrest seen in Baltimore from April 25<sup>th</sup> and beyond, was a reaction to that. Some representations of protest were seen peacefully with hundreds of people marching through the streets of Baltimore, then April 27<sup>th</sup> happened. Roughly around 10 a.m. on the morning of April 27<sup>th</sup>, message circled around social media that members of rival gangs would be coming together to target police and kill them. Surely the police had gotten this information just as soon as the general public received it if not sooner. The way they prepared for this occurrence only made the following events of the day much more intense. Police officers and squad cars from other neighboring cities and counties of Maryland were called for assistance in meeting this potential force from rival gangs. The area in which

the majority of officers were positioned affected neighboring high school kids from getting home by means of public transportation due to the fact that buses weren't running because of this. As those kids had gotten out of school they practically had nowhere to go and then the tension began. From Mondawmin Mall to North and Pennsylvania avenue kids were throwing things at the officers and gradually began trashing property like neighborhood mom and pop shops and local convenient store CVS. As the day continued into night, malls across the city and been broken into and the city was practically on fire by the end of day.

"Rioting is the voice of the unheard" – Martin Luther King Jr., was a caption that could be seen as CNN reported while interviewing different individuals from the community. The violence and looting was something that many individuals from the neighboring communities took kind to. Week long, people were found to be saying that violence is not the answer that it was complete outrage and was destroying the image of the peaceful displays of protest that had been put together prior to the rioting. Baltimore had now had the world at attention, has CNN committed almost all of their air time to covering Baltimore the days following, allotting only the rest to the catastrophe in Nepal were over 8,200 people died due to a 7.8 magnitude earthquake on April 25<sup>th</sup>. A lot of the focus after the rioting was on rebuilding the city and about teaching the youth of Baltimore how to peacefully protest. The question was why? Why on the exact same day as the funeral of Freddie Gray had the public reacted like this? What would the older generation teach the younger generation about protesting? Why were they so angry?

The quotation I used earlier in the paper from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was all the more fitting for CNN to use that day. Baltimore hadn't seen demonstration like that since the 68' Riots after King had been assassinated. Much like the riots back then people acted in outrage for not only one occurrence but a multitude of problems that plagued the black communities concerning civil rights at that time. In '68 the voice of millions of unheard across American so to speak was silenced. Today the youth of

Baltimore, or the country moreover, doesn't have a voice to speak for them and Freddie Gray wasn't that voice he had become a part of the unjust bubble that has been growing for years in African American communities. That bubble burst in Baltimore on April 27<sup>th</sup>. People living in low-income households in run down neighborhoods, with high crime-rates and poor interactions between themselves and the officers that are here to protect and serve, all came together that day and let out its wrath in a very prolific way.

When deciding who I should interview quite a few qualifications came about. I knew that talking to a youth involved in rioting, that would be close to my age, might not result in a good quality interview that would provide substantial content for my paper. I also knew that individual wouldn't incriminate themselves to a complete stranger attesting to the fact that they had been involved in acts that in legal eye obstructed justice. These things considered, I developed the idea that I had to interview someone I knew personally that was in or around their 50s and had familiarity with the '68 riots and could either correlate or contrast the two riots.

For many kids, this was their first time acting against law enforcement and expressing their qualms in the world with social injustice. With that in mind I knew my father would be best fit for interviewing as he was old enough to see and remember what was going on in '68 and he could speak on what the youth did from a more mature sense of perspective. I started with a asking about his childhood, he was born in '58, a much different time in Baltimore. He described being one of few black families in his neighborhood, which is today hardly believable knowing that the city is predominately African American. My father declared that he didn't necessarily have a feeling of inferiority to the police, but there weren't officer friendly's in his neighborhood either. He stated his bias early on in the interview as he said an officer murdered his dog at a young age and his disdain began there.

My father stressed over and over again in the interview the importance of hard work. This was something I thought was taking me off track in the questions I originally planned to ask and caused me

to begin asking questions almost off the top of my head. In hindsight, critically-thinking I saw that work was something that plagued his life as he was surrounded by it in his father figures and surrounding community coming up, it was something you had to do. He wasn't born into a family that lived off of social programs. Those programs had been introduced, but reengineered not long before my father was born with Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. With a value of hard work, my father's disposition on the current state of low-income neighborhoods in Baltimore was an outward perspective but one based on dependence. He felt that depending on and expecting the government to give them something accompanied with the closing of a lot of industry that created jobs for residents made things the way they are. In addition to that having law enforcement being abusive with authority and drugs problems within the community just all came together to prepare a distasteful recipe.

He didn't want to compare the two riots as he felt the occurrences were on two different platforms. The anger and reasoning all come from the same place though. He began speaking on the economy and how Obama hadn't been successful while in office, speaking on wanting a republican house to take over and bring industry back to Baltimore. He doesn't think that will necessarily be the cure all but would surely bring jobs and opportunity to Baltimore.

Growing up I knew my father had always been very politically aware. I didn't know him to be much of a protestor, aside from the Million Family March in 2000, and the Jena Six march in 2006, both of which took place in Washington, DC. He took me with him to both, and has always had me watch CNN and MSNBC to remain aware of things happening in government and other areas of the world. I knew that interviewing him would be kind of like asking questions I had already known the answer to. Composing the interview I tried my best to ask questions that wouldn't result in one word answers and him telling me that I already know how he feels on the particular situation. I believe it was successful overall, I got to learn some things I didn't necessarily know about his upbringing and that time period. Also, I got to hear a perspective that I didn't think was in line with the others I'd been hearing since the

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Aaron Leonard Coleman

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rioting had taken place. His answers had a bit of political influence and tied well together in a broader

spectrum to paint the picture of why kids were so angry.