

Newsweek

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Festering Tension

Detroit's Race Riots Ebb,
but U.S. Problem Remains



*whites and Negroes alike were hurt in
America's worst racial outbreak in
26 years*

Now, therefore, I . . . command all persons engaged in said unlawful and insurrectionary proceedings to disperse and retire peaceably to their respective abodes immediately.

There was no nonsense about President Roosevelt's words. He had called out Federal troops to halt the nation's worst race riot since the last war. When the shooting, the stoning, the knifing and the bludgeoning, the arson and the looting had ended after 24 hours, 35 were dead, some 700 injured, 1,300 under arrest, and a million dollars' worth of property damaged. War production dropped 40 per cent.

But the shame was not Detroit's alone. Its outbreaks were a symptom of a racial tension festering all over the country. It had already broken out seriously in Mobile, Ala., and Beaumont, Texas. There were minor clashes last week in El Paso

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where more than a score of cars were wrecked and burned . . .

and Port Arthur, Texas, New York City, Springfield, Mass., Hubbard, Ohio, and even in Britain, where the American Negro soldiers and military police battled in the streets of a Northwestern town. By no means had America heard the last of race rioting. And the Axis propagandists made the most of this grist for their mill, which grinds out a volume of such news.

"It is a singular fact," said a Japanese broadcast, "that supposedly civilized Americans in these times deny the Negroes the opportunity to engage in respectable jobs, the right of access to the restaurants, theaters, or the same train accommodations as themselves and periodically will run amuck to lynch Negroes individually or to slaughter them wholesale—old men, women, and children alike in race wars like the present one."

At the root of it all lay the vast sociological complex that makes for bigotry on both sides. Detroit's story was unique in many ways, typical in others.

Genesis: World symbol of machine-age power, a city of sparse beauty and sprawling, majestic ugliness, Detroit has battered on its genius for mass production. In pre-Civil War days a small-town haven for escaped Negro slaves fleeing to Canada via the Underground Railroad, Detroit grew in population from 465,766 in 1910 to nearly 1,000,000 in the next ten years, to 1,568,662 by 1930, and to 1,623,452 in the 1940 census. War production has now swelled it to an estimated 2,500,000. Its lure was work and high wages, higher than most of the newcomers had ever imagined. Over the years workers and their families, aliens and natives, white and Negro, swarmed into Detroit—at first to make automobiles, later to make airplanes, tanks, and guns.

In this too-rapid growth, sociological change couldn't keep pace with scientific and technological progress. Detroit housing, transportation, recreation facilities, and spiritual growth lagged. In the '20s and '30s gangsterism flared. The rise of industrial unionism introduced new tangles in the economic web. The advent of mixed nationalities and races spawned such agents of intolerance as the Ku Klux Klan, the National Workers League, and the Black Legion.

The Negro was their special target. In the nine years between 1916 and 1925 the black population, brought in largely from the South and Midwest, had jumped from 8,000 to 85,000, and in the next fifteen years to 150,000 without a corresponding rise in housing for Negroes. They spilled over into white areas. More and more Negroes worked beside white men in the

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factories and rode beside them in buses and trolleys. White men, many of whom also were Southerners, steeped in native prejudices, muttered sullenly.

Some of the Negroes, too, turned arrogant. They had more money and freedom than they had ever enjoyed home in the South. Others grew desperate and despairing as they saw their sons and brothers enter the fighting forces while discrimination against them mounted at home. Negroes felt that the Administration, while vaunting its Four Freedoms before the world, did little for their race at home.

As typical of this equivocal attitude Negroes cite the Administration's stand during the disorders at Sojourner Truth* houses, built by the Federal Housing Administration as a Negro housing project. When whites protested against its occupancy by Negroes, FHA authorities at first yielded. Then on the complaint of Negroes and liberal white groups, the government changed its mind. On Feb. 28, 1942, when Negroes started to move in, whites blocked the streets and riots followed.

Only recently, another outbreak of prejudice occurred at the Packard plant, where an unauthorized strike of 20,000 white workers followed the upgrading of three skilled Negro workers.

Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was sorely aware of these racial rumblings when he spoke in Detroit on June 3 at the opening of the Emergency Conference on the Status of the Negro in the War for the Four Freedoms. "A race riot may break out here at any time," said White.

Just seventeen days later, the spark was struck for the worst explosion of racial hatred since the East St. Louis (Ill.) riots of July 1917, which took 33 lives and caused injuries to at least 300 persons and property damage of \$1,400,000.

Eruption: Shimmering heat enveloped Detroit on Sunday, June 20. One escape lay in the municipal park on Belle Isle in the Detroit River. Trees and water offered some relief, but even there frazzled nerves were evident in the throng of 50,000, most of them Negroes. Through the sultry summer afternoon and the long cooling twilight the races skirmished in isolated fist fights.

The bigger battle came about 10:45 p.m. It started with a fight on the bridge leading to the mainland and spread like fire in a paint factory. In a flood of rumors it roared across the city to the shabby Negro quarter called "Paradise Valley." Before long it was completely out of control. Automobiles were overturned and set afire—police towed nineteen wrecks from one six-block area—trolleys were stoned, and food and clothing stores were looted.

Gov. Harry F. Kelly hurried home from the Governors' Conference in Columbus, Ohio (see page 42), and proclaimed a state of emergency. He imposed a curfew between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. closed places of amusement, canceled Tuesday's Cleveland-Detroit baseball game and the day's

*So named for the Negro poet of the Civil War.

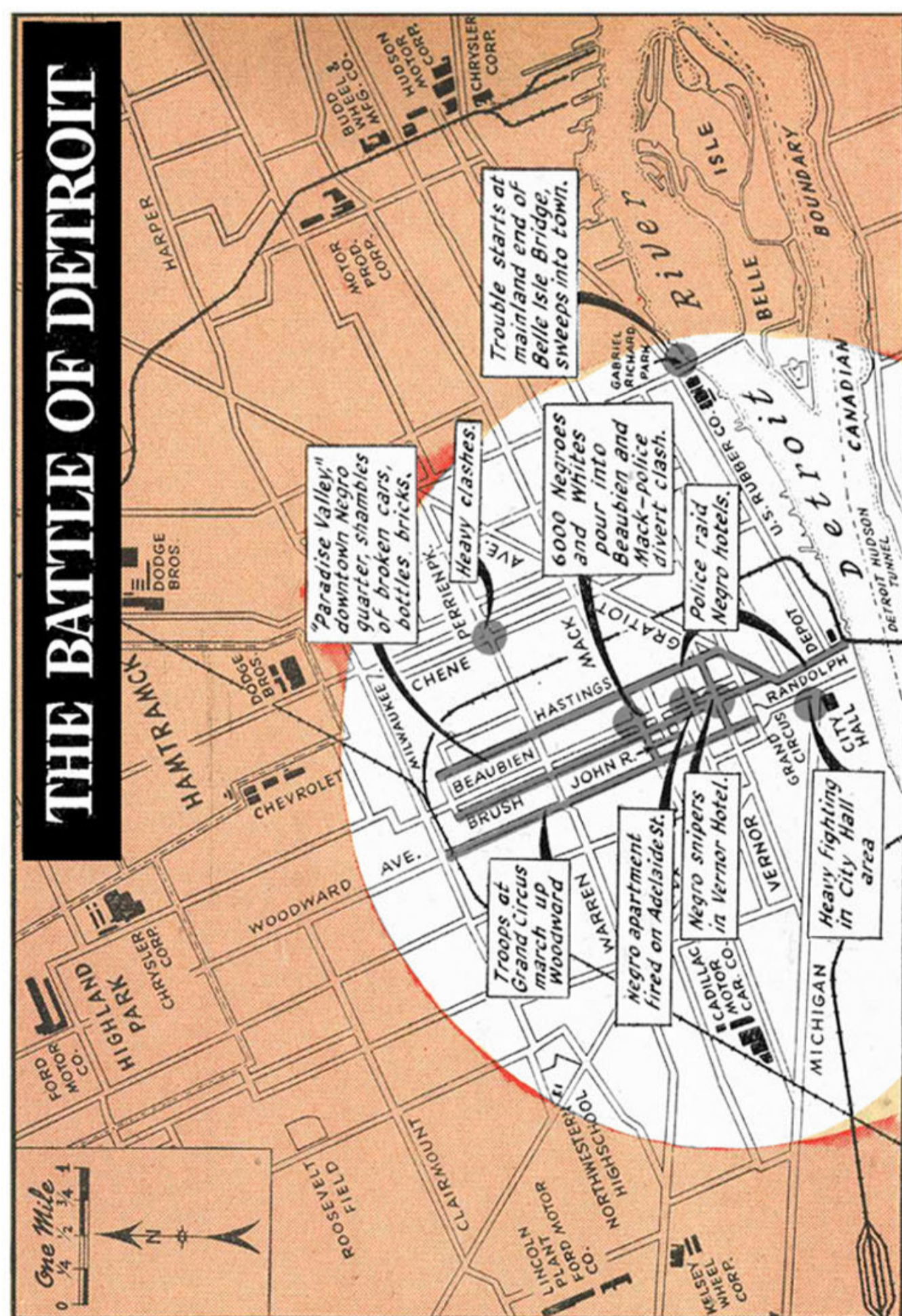
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horse racing at the Michigan Fair Grounds, and suspended the sale of liquor. State police were ordered into the city to help Mayor Edward J. Jeffries Jr.'s harried city force, and 6,000 state troops were mobilized. Schools closed. Thousands of Negro workers stayed home to protect their families. Police pumped 1,000 rounds of ammunition and dozens of tear-gas bombs into an apartment house to rout Negro snipers.

But it took President Roosevelt's proclamation and Federal troops to end the battle. In full battle dress, soldiers, 3,800 strong rolled into town in jeeps, trucks, and armored cars and bivouacked along 2 miles of Woodward Avenue.

As Detroit's bloody week ended, rioters were being rushed through courts on misdemeanor charges at the rate of 100 a day, most of them getting 90-day sentences. And most of them were Negroes. On Monday of this week the curfew and the ban on liquor sales were lifted, and part of the troops were ordered out.

Governor Kelly's four-man fact-finding committee announced it found no evidence that the rioting was organized by subversive elements. At the governor's request, Dr. C. F. Ramsey, director of the State Bureau of Child Welfare, began forming a staff of interviewers to question 900 persons still in jail, in an attempt to trace the causes of the riot. Rep. Martin Dies's announcement that he and his committee would investigate to determine whether Japanese incited the riots brought from Jeffries a reply that Michigan could handle it. But Kelly admitted the basic problem went far beyond his own state: "Whatever the cause, it is not a local problem. It is America's problem."



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