

**Do you think there is some connection between the riots of today and the riots of 1968 in Baltimore?**

They are both part of the same struggle for civil rights. Both had to do with the overarching problems of discrimination, injustice, unfair policing, class entrenchment, poverty, etc. that exist in this country. Of course the specific events that sparked things in '68 and today are different but the response, in both cases, relate to the extreme frustration over the seeming intractability of these issues.

Riots happen all the time in the United States but they are usually sparked by affluent college students or sports fans. While rioting is self-defeating, at least with what happened in Ferguson and Baltimore, there's a reason that goes beyond overzealous enthusiasm or wanton destruction.

**How do you explain police brutality against blacks in a city with black mayor and black police chief?**

There has been great progress in the United States when it comes to the gains of many African Americans. Obviously the fact that we have an African American mayor and police chief reflects that, not to mention an African American president. However, this country has never had an honest reckoning with our long history of poor treatment of African Americans. We also haven't done nearly enough to fight the systemic and often more subtle forms of racism that punish African Americans disproportionately. We're very quick to jump on people who use the n-word or reflect racist sentiments overtly and publicly, but we do miserably when it comes to the deficits in quality of life, education, health, freedom, etc. that affect millions. These issues are complex and require more than calling individuals out as racist. It's easy to point the blame on someone else. It's much harder to reflect on how we're part of the problem (all of us who don't face this kind of discrimination).

Rather than provide a proper social safety net we try and fix our problems through locking people up. We blame teachers for not magically eliminating poverty. We blame the poor because we can't acknowledge the economic circumstances that keep them in poverty. There is an oligarchy of wealthy and mostly white individuals who control our politics. This is a fact that is widely known but for which there is surprisingly little outrage. This is a fact that has not changed in spite of the civil rights gains we've made in this country. The United States loves its millionaires and billionaires and will do whatever it can to keep them happy.

[This article in Jacobin Magazine](#) by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains how many of our African American political figures are unable to break the patterns that put the blame on the poor for economic inequity. We have more African American leaders in positions of power than ever before, but those leaders, if they want to survive in mainstream politics, are beholden to the same interests as their white counterparts. Wealthy individuals and companies "donate" huge

sums of money to both political parties, which means they can't lose. This is part of the reason voter turnout in the U.S. is so low. The general populace is not engaged with the system and doesn't have faith in the system. This shows the fragility of our democracy. However, because the majority of Americans live in relative comfort (even if their economic gains are significantly less or stagnant when compared to the top 1%) it is easy for the wealthy to control almost every aspect of our "democracy." It's not a conspiracy, it's just the default setting in America when not enough of us participate in how we are governed.

So the economic story is central, and economics and race mix together, but race alone is a factor that also can't be ignored. Any of our African American political figures could find themselves treated differently, if they failed to be recognized, simply because of the color of their skin. Even when they are recognized they are scrutinized and forced to perform at a level that is higher than most of their white counterparts. Even African American celebrities find themselves targeted by police disproportionately. Just about any African American can tell you stories of how they have had to deal with discrimination. We still have a problem with race in the United States that economics alone can't fix.

Racism is a phenomenon that is best understood on a spectrum. It's rarely an either/or situation. The reason institutionalized racism so often goes unnoticed is because we're all so used to it. It's simply taken for granted. One of the biggest mistakes a lot of people, particularly white people, make, is that they want to inoculate themselves from racism. They want to sit firmly in a camp that proclaims, I'm not racist, now let's move on. It's never that simple. Our whole country, our constitution, everything, is enmeshed with racist belief and policy. Everyone is a product of their environment and it's very hard for anyone to see past their own anecdotal experiences. Just as it's hard for people who live in "bad" neighborhoods to escape their poverty it's hard for people who live comfortable lives to see beyond their sheltered existence. We raise up our slaveholding founding fathers on pedestals, celebrating their enlightened moments while ignoring their incredible misdeeds, which are rarely discussed beyond hushed academic circles. We have never faced the stinging realization that while our most celebrated founder, George Washington, fought for our nation's freedom (the freedom of white land-owning men), he was [wearing the teeth of African Americans in his own mouth](#). We can't be honest in our history books let alone with the reality of where we find ourselves today.

Central to all of this is the drug war. Even though Baltimore's police force is roughly 50/50 African American and white, because that force is primarily used as an army in a drug war that disproportionately targets African Americans, it reflects the racism of our society. As Michelle Alexander explains very well in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, the policies of the drug war are just the latest manifestation of institutionalized racism in this country.

**In your opinion, what was the cause that peaceful demonstrations turned into violent riots?**

I think it's important to make a distinction between the mostly peaceful protests and the rioting that took place. I participated in the large protest on April 25th in which, at the end, a small group of people broke off and damaged some police cars and looted some shops. I went home by the time that was happening, but I can tell you, from the TV coverage that I later watched, I didn't recognize any of the individuals involved in the violence that took place. It's also important to know that the police acted aggressively themselves. One of the young men involved in wrecking a police car later turned himself in and he now has bail set at a dollar amount higher than the police officers who killed Freddie Gray. Evidently breaking some windows is a more serious crime than breaking someone's back! The imbalance in the scales of justice can be seen from start to finish.

The situation that happened on April 27th, when the full blown riot took place, was also different. This wasn't a situation where protesters suddenly turned violent. These were mostly high school students who were, again, provoked by the police. [This article in Mother Jones](#) explains in more detail the events that sparked the violence. If the police had treated the students with respect, perhaps they wouldn't have created such a large army of angry young people.

### **Where were you on Monday and how did you react?**

I'm a librarian at the city's public library and was working when the rioting started. We had to close an hour early because a group of rioters came through and attacked several stores and cars nearby. Luckily they didn't attack the library. I went home and watched the events on TV with a friend and my family. Of course I was upset, like everyone else, with what was happening in my city, especially since rioting is mostly self-destructive behavior.

The next day the library was open again for business. While I wanted to go out with my neighbors and help in the cleanup of areas where the rioting had taken place, it felt good to be working in a capacity for good in my city. The rest of the week was quieter than normal, but we continued to help people apply for jobs and look for information and entertainment as we always do.

### **How are the things today in Baltimore?**

I find myself worrying about the aftermath of these events. I hope that the long term "cure" won't be worse than the affliction. Things are remarkably good in the sense that no further large scale violence has taken place. Importantly, no one was killed as a result of the rioting. I participated in another large march/protest on May 1st that was incredibly inspiring. It was a true cross section of my city. We also received the good news that the officers responsible for the death of Freddie Gray were being charged. Whether those charges will lead to convictions is

a whole other story, but at least the wrongs they committed have been acknowledged in an official way.

The real trick is whether we can get to a point, as a country, where we honestly examine the systemic problems that have gotten us here. This is the incredible challenge we face. Can we get the average “silent American” to wake up and join with their neighbors to effect change?

**Do you think that something changed forever in Baltimore’s society?**

I hope so. I hope something will change for the better. These issues are far beyond Baltimore or Ferguson or any individual place in America. They are everywhere. It’s immensely frustrating to live in a country with such an obscene degree of wealth and realize that so many are denied their rightful share. It’s not just about everyone being equal economically but about African American lives mattering as much as white lives. No one should be treated like they are second class citizens. I feel a lot more optimism than I usually do but I’m also very cautious and nervous about that optimism. I feel like we’re on the crest of a hill and we could maybe roll over and forward into a society that, though far from perfect, is still better than what it was or we could roll backwards into the kind of fear, division, and paranoia that has characterized our nation after the September 11th attacks and in other times of crisis.

As unfortunate as the violence of April 27th was, I think it’s very important to remember that it’s nothing compared to the tortured death of Freddie Gray. Property can be replaced. There are many other Freddie Grays out there that have been ignored. The fact that this time, his death wasn’t ignored gives me a sense of hope that maybe the empathy levels of Americans are improving, even if just a little. Sure there is a lot of vitriol and victim-blaming going on, but if these events had happened five years ago they would have been largely ignored. We’ve got a long way to go, but at least we’re talking about this stuff now. Even if the conversation isn’t as intelligent as it could be, it’s better than the complete *and depraved* indifference we had before.