

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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## **For What Will Rodney King Really Be Remembered?**

### **Between The Lines**

**By Dr. Anthony Asadullah Samad, PhD**

**BC Columnist**

The passing of Rodney King represents the end of an American tragedy. More tragic than King's life ending at the early age, 47, is that he may be remembered for something much less significant than that for which he should be remember. See, Rodney wasn't the tragedy. The torturous beating of Rodney King in March of 1991 was the unveiling of an American tragedy, corruption under the cover of authority.

The beating was most vicious thing that those born in the post civil rights era (after 1968 and the death of another King) had personally witnessed. But that same generation had been victims of all the draconian laws that came in the aftermath of the civil rights/pro black radical movements, including a refashioned practice called "racial profiling." Many of them had a hidden animus for the po'lice that their parents and grandparents didn't understand. There has always been great suspicion of law enforcement in the black and Latino communities, and for great reason. But the Gen Xers and Yers had a deep seeded hatred for police. We couldn't understand the intensity of the anger demonstrated by Compton Rap Group, *Niggas With Attitudes* (known as *NWA*). This represented more than just artistic defiance. It represented a rejection of the police as a represented protector of our community. The police were now the predators and our youth were the prey.

Young people knew what their parents knew not. The police were considered "dirty." We had enough sense to know that it wasn't every cop, but we knew it was enough to create a dirty culture of silence and

complicity. Nobody knew how dirty the culture had become until they saw what will forever be known as *the tape*. At that moment, *we knew*. We then knew the reason for our children's outrage against the police.

We didn't know his name when we first saw it, but we knew nobody deserved to be beaten like that. Once we would learn his name, we would never forget it. The Rodney King beating was the unveiling of the underbelly of the Los Angeles Police Department and the testing of the so-called "colorblind" criminal justice system.

Both the cops and the courts failed the public scrutiny test. The cops that beat King were put on trial, and the court system failed to prosecute them. The justice system upheld injustice.

When the law failed Rodney, the community failed to respect the law and the worse riot in American history ensued. Everybody in Los Angeles was failed that day. For six days. To stop the murder and mayhem (after the police pulled out of most parts of the city), somebody got the idea to bring out Rodney King to ask the rioters to stop. King, confused, disoriented - which he always seemed to be since the beating - stammered those six famous words, "Can't we all just get along." Los Angeles began to calm down after that, but this is NOT what Rodney King should be known for. Nor should he be known as the source of the riots that bear his name. Rodney King should be known as the cause for revamping policing and racial profiling practices, not just in Los Angeles but in the United States of America. Consider this...

When the 1992 riots broke out, LAPD had a police chief more powerful than the Mayor of Los Angeles. He had more votes on the City Council than the Mayor had. They tried to fire him by council vote, and *couldn't*. They couldn't *make* him retire. He couldn't even be shamed into retiring - LAPD had no shame. He agreed to retire *after he fixed the problem*. Nobody had confidence that he could. The federal government was called in, a commission was assembled to study LAPD, now famously known as the Christopher Commission Report (named after former Secretary of State, Warren Christopher) and the report was scathing. The report told us what our youth had been telling us for a decade, that the department had covered up misconduct and abuse - something that *never* would have been uncovered had the Rodney King beating not have come to the public's attention. Intimidation was too great, and the culture was too pervasive.

Moreover, LAPD had no oversight - nobody to report to - and had managed to avoid federal oversight for decades. LAPD now has an Inspector General and commission oversight to insure that there is no return of the abuse culture. Some say it's creeping back - but hopefully it will never reach the point where it was. The Rodney King beating became the "teaching moment" for other "big city" and urban departments. Policing has changed in America due to God putting his hand on Rodney King. Rodney King's last public appearance in Los Angeles was at the Urban Issues Breakfast Forum on May 25th. He still looked confused, disoriented and somewhat emotionally fragile. But the community ignored all that. Rodney King was *still standing*, and had taken down the monster we once knew as the Los Angeles Police Department. For that, over 400 people gave him a rousing standing ovation. And just that quickly, now he's gone.

Rodney King is now an American lexicon, the tag for police abuse - as in "I've been Rodney Kinged." But more than that, Rodney King will be known as the man who survived the most brutal beating the nation had ever *witnessed*. King's beating brought justice back to policing, if not just for a short time. The LAPD we know today is not the one we knew two decades ago.

Rodney King didn't choose to become a symbol of justice, and never really seemed to be quite comfortable with the fame (or infamy) thrust upon him. He wasn't a perfect man, but God always uses imperfect people to carry out perfect missions. Sometimes, those who seek publicity never get it and those who don't - sometimes become part of a history they couldn't avoid. It would be tragic if all Rodney King was remembered for was a stammering epilogue in the most expensive urban revolt in history. He should be remembered for changing the reality of urban policing. And for uncovering the corruption that so many of us knew existed but could never prove.

May God bless the soul of Rodney King, for his reward is surely a name the people will never forget. Long live Rodney King - not for six small words, but for one BIG sacrifice.

**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, Dr. Anthony Asadullah Samad, is a national columnist, managing director of the [Urban Issues Forum](#) and author of [Saving The Race: Empowerment Through Wisdom](#). His Website is [AnthonySamad.com](#). Twitter [@dranthonyasad](#). Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Samad.



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