

## A Glaring Omission From Legacy of the Riots--Apologies

Steve Lopez

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Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

Call me naive, but I'm still waiting for one person to fess up. Just one guy to walk into a store and say, you know what? I looted this TV 10 years ago when the streets were wild, and I don't want my kids watching this stolen property one more night. Here's the money I owe you.

No. I am not holding my breath.

In coverage of the 10-year anniversary of the Rodney King verdict and the senseless destruction that followed, I've seen explanations and recollections. I've seen claims of progress and complaints about the lack thereof. But in the entire deconstruction of 1992, I haven't seen or heard one person take responsibility for the rampage or the suffering it caused, nor have I seen much of a condemnation of it.

Fifty-four dead. More than 3,000 stores looted or burned. A billion dollars in damage.

Not one mea culpa.

"That's what galls me the most," said Charles Kim, who heads the Korean American Coalition. Kim reminds me that hundreds of Korean families had their entire holdings reduced to ashes and were never compensated. "Ten years later, who's saying I'm sorry? The mayor? No. The governor? No. The police chief? No. I haven't seen anyone say it."

I was on the streets of Los Angeles in 1992, sent here by an East Coast newspaper. One day, I stopped my car at a long line of people waiting to pick up their mail after delivery had been cut off. They took offense at my very presence, saying there was no way I could tell their story accurately, and ran me off the street.

Fair enough. They had good reason to be worked up, distrustful, and in no mood to chat with an interloper. The economic crash had hit south Los Angeles like a bomb, and when the cretins who beat the living daylight out of Rodney King took a walk, everyone knew there'd be a price to pay.

But the burning and looting were insane. Look, I can appreciate people being enraged about getting the short end of it at every turn. But nihilistic mobs obliterated primarily their own neighborhoods and drove out the only merchants who'd set up stakes. It made no sense, even though there'd previously been tension between the black and Korean communities.

There's been plenty of hand-holding and prayer offerings in the last few weeks, lots of chatter about healing and moving on. But how can you get more than two steps down that road when Charles Kim speaks of the bitterness that remains?

He says businesses that were destroyed by the hundreds were built by families who worked from sunrise to sunset--Dad, Mom, the grandparents and even the children pitching in. For the most part, those families had no health insurance because they couldn't afford it, and they had no property insurance for the same reason.

"Many merchants filed for bankruptcy, their houses were foreclosed, their kids dropped out of school," Kim says. "The Korean community suffered tremendously, and who pays attention? The media? No. The black community got millions of dollars after the riots. We're the victims, and how much did we get? Nothing."

I asked the Rev. Mark Whitlock of FAME Renaissance, which has helped rebuild the community that suffered worst in 1992, whether he thought it would be useful for someone to utter the words Charles Kim has waited 10 years to hear.

No one apologized for slavery, Whitlock said. Obviously, he went on, the burning and looting and the taking of life were wrong. But it was done by every race, he pointed out quite accurately. "And, I would contend, probably some Asians, too."

"So who should apologize?" Whitlock asks.

How about those who burned and looted? How about so-called community leaders whose silence was an endorsement? Some of those same leaders have had their hands out ever since, pleading for someone to invest in the neighborhood.

Guess what. Korean merchants invested in the neighborhood. It didn't work out all that well for them.

"There's repentance and sorrow in every circle I travel in," says the Rev. Cecil "Chip" Murray of First AME Church. "How ridiculous it was to set those fires. How understandable, but how ridiculous."

This is exactly what I'm talking about. With all due respect to the reverend, it wasn't understandable.

Anger was understandable. Rage was understandable.

Looting and burning 3,300 businesses run by people just trying to get from one day to the next was not understandable, it was unforgivable. And I don't know why no one's got the courage to unconditionally condemn it as an episode as vile as the beating of Rodney King.

The Rev. Murray told me it's time to move on. "It is totally useless," he said, "to keep playing in the ashes."

I never considered it play, and my guess is that Charles Kim didn't, either.

Steve Lopez writes Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Reach him at [steve.lopez@latimes.com](mailto:steve.lopez@latimes.com).