

DETROIT POLICE DEPARTMENT
Administration Division
Inter-Office Memorandum
Citizen Complaint Bureau

TO: Commissioner Johannes F. Spreen

Date July 25, 1968

SUBJECT: Conclusion to Cobo Hall Incident

From the available information developed in this investigation, it is clearly evident this entire incident or series of incidents involves a great number of civilians and police officers. It abounds with charges and counter-charges, consistencies and inconsistencies; varied and complex to a degree affecting equitable culpability.

The majority of citizens volunteering information tend to indicate the police overreacted to a difficult, unfortunate situation, despite the fact that several ranking police officials were present. The greatest criticism and most abrasive grievance seems to be the sudden appearance and use of horses by the mounted division to disperse an unruly crowd, which to many, appeared to stampede and force the marchers into a cordon of baton wielding foot patrolmen. Hypothetically, had the horses not been on the scene, the most glaring phase of the incident would not have transpired.

Obviously, the entire incident was set in motion by a lack of communication and a misjudgment over a stalled sound car belonging to the marchers. The officers deemed most responsible for such incompatibility have been summoned before the police trial board for proper hearing and adjudication.

Whether the police handling of the overall incident was devoid of emotional error is not completely answered. Emotions were running high on both sides. There is evidence from many sources that police were taunted and harassed by participants during the entire march. There is also evidence that supervision, coordination and communication appeared lacking on both sides in several phases. Obviously this factor weighed heavily in the root causes of the problem.

The many complaints emanating from this incident are from unavailable persons, general in nature and lack necessary elements to clearly pinpoint individual culpability, such as the absence of coordinated supervision. However, as depicted in several photos taken by private photographers during the height of the tumult plus statements of witnesses, there definitely appears evidence of questionable activity by Patrolman John Kursteiner, #2670, of the Tactical Mobile Unit.

Inspector /s/ Carl Hefferman
Citizen Complaint Bureau

HJ:ygd

STATEMENT OF WITNESS

On the evening of May 13, 1968 at about 8:45 p.m. at Cobo Hall in Detroit, Michigan, an altercation occurred between police and members of the Midwest Caravan PPC.

Scene at Approximately 8:45 p.m.

Phillip Mason and I were with the caravan as observers for the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice. At the time of the conflict, I was in a telephone booth when I heard a number of crashes in front of the building. I immediately ran outside. I could see horses chasing people outside the glass doors and foot policemen chasing people inside.

I asked several command officers to pull other officers back. They attempted but were unsuccessful. In fact, one command officer was knocked down by a patrolman. Police officers were very uncooperative with both Mason and me. We asked Officer Gerlak, Badge No. L-54, to pull the horses back since, in our estimation, they were not necessary. He refused.

Subsequently I saw police officers ride horses into a crowd which I judged to be under control. In addition, I saw officers strike individuals in that crowd with their nightsticks for no apparent reason.

After approximately one hour, Dennis and Mason had a long conversation with Officer Bertoni, Commander of Police Unit at Cobo Hall. Following our talk, Chief Bertoni pulled the mounted officers out and also removed other police whose presence was increasing tensions.

I know of at least seven persons who were injured.

CRS representatives suggested that Officer Gerlak and several other officers be suspended. One officer, Badge No. 2999, for apparent reason pulled a carbine from the trunk of his car. When I pointed out to him that this appeared both unnecessary and inflammatory, he put the carbine back in his trunk but refused to give me his name. Officer Kursteiner, Badge No. 2670, unnecessarily struck a young man being supported by Mason.

All of this was over a stalled car well out of any traffic. Police were insensitive and acted as such.

Date: June 13, 1968

SAM J. DENNIS

Field Representative
Community Relations Service
U. S. Department of Justice

STATEMENT OF WITNESS

At about 8:45 P.M., May 13, 1968, one of the marshals, called Barracuda, was having difficulty at the communications car with a policeman, Badge 2999, in front of Cobo Hall. It was the official communications car of the march. The car had been identified to all marchers and local officials at each city. The car was also at the disposal of CRS field representatives. The car is operated by Howard Royer, National Council of Churches, who is a member of the Church of the Brethren. The car had encountered some mechanical difficulties concerning the battery. Several individuals, who were marshals and who had been riding in the communications car, had been sent for a new battery. An officer encountered Barracuda at the car and requested that the car be removed. He was informed that the battery was not working and that as soon as the battery came he would move the car. However, I should note that the car was not causing any undue problems and that the officer had no reason to request the moving of the car even in light of the fact that he did not know it was an official car, because most of the traffic was being detoured from the area. The car was located in front of Cobo Hall at the curb. The officer became angry and ordered a tow truck to pull the car. The marshals were summoned by Dave Rogers, captain of the marshals. The marshals came out of the building and surrounded the car. Some sat on the car and some stood around it. They began to sing and clap. I arrived on the scene from inside Cobo Hall.

As I arrived (1) I observed the singing, chanting and clapping of the marshals; and (2) I observed spectators who appeared in a happy mood; (3) I observed a tow truck; (4) I observed four horse-mounted policemen hurrying to the scene. They stopped their horses about 50 feet from the communications car and about 30 feet on my left. I was standing 10 feet in back of the communications car directly in front of Cobo Hall. The officer in charge of mounted police approached the communications car and, on his approach, ordered citizens who were just standing and crossing the street coming in and out of Cobo Hall to get off the street pavement and onto the curb.

At that point, I moved out to the curb and identified myself verbally and by showing my Department of Justice credentials to the officer. The officer's name is Gerlac. His badge number is L-54. He was the officer in charge of the mounted police at the time. After showing him my credentials, I suggested he remove his mounted police because the problem was one that could easily be handled by local committee or march officials. He disregarded my credentials and deliberately caused his horse to tramp on my foot and ordered his men to forcibly, by using the horses, move the crowd back. Officer Gerlac approached the marshals who were still around the car. He caused his horse to push people against the car. He did this without warning. Other mounted police indiscriminately began to use their horses to push the spectators. At one time I was surrounded by three horses and was simultaneously being pushed by the horse of Officer Gerlac. The horses were moved into a line, which was now immediately to my right at the end of the sidewalk, raced backwards and forwards bumping into, knocking down, and tramping the individual citizens who were there.

The actions of the horsemen on the crowd were, in my judgment, uncalled for. The crowd was just standing there observing, walking in and walking out. I observed no provocation on the part of the marchers, the marshals, or the crowd for the officers to behave in that manner. As the crowd of people sought refuge inside Cobo Hall, foot patrolmen quickly seized and manhandled them inside the building.

While this was going on, I raced from one policeman to another appealing to them to be more considerate, not to use their clubs, and stated that their force was unnecessary. I saw old ladies being pushed and manhandled, grabbed by the collar and pushed out the doors. I saw young men being beaten with billy clubs. I had one young man, Tommy Willis, in my arms and holding him there from falling and watched Officer Kurstiener, Badge No. 267, as I was keeping the gentleman from falling, take his billy club and poke it with great force into Willis' side.

The action described above took place in the span of 10 to 15 minutes. Upon its conclusion I complained to Conrad Mallet, the Mayor's assistant, and to Officer Bertoni, the officer in charge of all the police in the area. Officer Bertoni could not immediately respond and requested I give him time to "get things under control."

At 9:30 P.M. several individuals returned with a battery for the communications car.

We have the names of 6 individuals who sustained injuries. They are as follows:

James Brown, 4036 Champlain Avenue, Chicago, Illinois
Karen Ashby, 4718 Woodlawn, Chicago, Illinois
Michel Gramer, 7939 South Elizabeth, Chicago, Illinois
Thomas Willis, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

We also have:

Tommy Johnson, 3344 West Adams Street, Westside Chicago
Donald Hill, 15211 Redington, Indianapolis, Indiana.

These individuals were taken to the Detroit General Hospital and treated.

Other witnesses to the incident are as follows:

Catherine Wells, 4841 Stzeetazant Street, Detroit, Michigan TE 4-1919
Rita Brown, 9030 McClullen Street, Detroit, Michigan 922-5406
Sandra Bonjac, 9204 Livernois Street, Detroit, Michigan 935-6060
Virginia Jones, 3758 W. Euclid Street, Detroit, Michigan 895-1090
Jean Cellar Smith, 4081 Tyler Street, Detroit, Michigan 935-8604
Fred Hughes, 19341 Cherry Lawn, Detroit, Michigan (telephone unknown)

Date:

June 11, 1968

/s/ Phillip H. Mason
PHILLIP H. MASON

Field Representative
Community Relations Service
U. S. Department of Justice