

Alexandria in 1969: Police Violence, Race Relations, and a Call for Reform

Dr. Krystyn Moon

Professor of History and American Studies, University of Mary Washington

Mark Twain once reportedly said: "history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Without question, this catchy aphorism applies to the events of the past week that have rocked our country and the world. It should also be recognized that the issue of white police violence towards African American men is also part of Alexandria's not so distant past too.

By the late 1960s, the United States repeatedly saw clashes over questions of equity as federal authorities slowly dismantled the government apparatus that supported the racial status quo. Education, transportation, jobs, housing, marriage, and voting were among the many areas where African Americans hoped to see substantial changes in how local, state, and federal governments operated. African Americans were not alone. The country experienced widespread demands for the breakdown of hierarchies that greatly limited access and opportunities. The recently established La Raza Unida promoted the end of discrimination towards Latinos and wanted more programming that addressed the relationship between segregationist practices and poverty. Cesar Chavez, concerned about the abuses within California's agriculture industry, organized boycotts and marches to make American consumers aware of the dangers that farm workers faced. Asian Americans established a Pan-Asian Movement that recognized their common experiences of persons of Asian ancestry who had experienced discrimination particularly through American immigration laws. Most significantly, the Japanese American Redress Movement demanded that the federal government apologize for the mistreatment of persons of Japanese ancestry along the West Coast of the United States during World War II. Native American organizations also fought for tribal sovereignty and more positive images of indigenous peoples in American popular culture. The American Indian Movement, operating in cities such as Minneapolis, also demanded an end police harassment and the creation of empowerment programs for Native American youth. Women, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, wanted to have access to jobs that had traditionally been the domain of men as well as promoted conversations about reproductive health, domestic violence, and gender roles. Finally, the Stonewall Riots in the summer of 1969 led to the founding of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), one of our earliest gay rights organizations.

In Alexandria, race relations primarily operated along a black-white axis, very different from the diversity of our city today. The breakdown of local discriminatory attitudes and practices occurred in fits and spurts, and often in response to grassroots activism within the city or pressures from the federal government. Public conversations about the need to address systemic racism within Alexandria's police force did not begin until 1969. When Officer Claiborne Callahan pistol-whipped at least one African American teenager in the Arlandria neighborhood, African American residents demanded that he be reprimanded for excessive force. Instead, the police brought teenagers up on charges, and local whites organized a dinner to celebrate Callahan. Outraged by these responses, African American residents organized mass

meetings and marches with protests outside of city hall and the police department. Two weeks later, after police officers harassed students at a high school football game, fire bombings occurred for the next two nights. By the end of the weekend, the governor sent state troopers.

In the meantime, local government officials held meetings to allow residents to air their concerns. Ira L. Robinson, a community activist who was later elected to City Council in 1970, pointed to the larger structural issues in Alexandria. "What I would recommend to the City Council is that it get underway not only with the Callahan case, not only with police communications with the community, but it get underway with everything that deprives black citizens of the incident of life that belongs to a black citizen in 1969 America." An investigation by researchers from the National Center of Police and Community Relations at Michigan State University, hired by the city manager, only confirmed complaints from Robinson and others.

Police mistreatment was a major issue, but researchers also noted that Alexandria had to develop a new, more inclusive kind of governance. As part of their research, they referenced the 1968 Kerner Commission Report, which looked at the violence that occurred after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and provided recommendations to address governmental policy failures, particularly in areas such as education and housing. Michigan State University researchers argued: "The question of community control has arisen lately in regard to schools, poverty programs, and it is beginning to be raised with reference to the police. People are saying that they want a voice, a share in shaping their community lives. Sometimes what they are saying is translated into movements, demonstrations, or organizations, capable of very significant political power plays, often with potent racial or ethnic implications. This is what Black Power and Black Militancy is basically all about; it has to do with sovereignty, and it is fundamentally a political question. Either whites will share community sovereignty equitably with Blacks, or Blacks will demand sovereignty over the Black populace. Ultimately, there will be Black communities having control over their own services, over all jobs for blacks, over their own local budget, over housing, etc. Next to them there will be white communities with comparable powers. And no man will be able to move from one community to the other. This is the society that the Kerner Commission forecasts, if present trends continue. Simply stated, it is apartheid."

Before City Council decided which recommendations to initiate based on the Michigan State University investigation, another incident highlighted once again the problems of systematic racism when a white store clerk killed Robin Gibson in the summer of 1970. The clerk argued that it was self-defense; the victim's friends, however, recounted that the clerk had accused them of shoplifting and asked that they turn their pockets inside out. When they put their hands into their pockets, he pulled out a gun and shot at them. In response to this incident, violence swept through Alexandria again, and City Council declared a state of emergency. Adding to racial tensions, the Alexandria Citizens Defense League, a white-only organization, armed themselves and patrolled the streets.

By 1970, City Council began to articulate the changes necessary for a more inclusive city. Reforms included the hiring of a new police chief and the establishment of a community relations program. A Police Chief Advisory Committee would suggest reforms to the department and facilitate communication between the police and neighborhoods. City Council also admitted that the impact of racism went beyond the police; local government had to reorient its relationship with residents and fix “the credibility gap.”

The events of 1969 and 1970 were part of a long, complicated process in which Alexandria residents grappled with racial inequalities. And--in many ways--those issues have not gone away in Alexandria and elsewhere in our country.