



Some fear rioting may seal Ferguson fate for decades

By Yamiche Alcindor
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FERGUSON, Mo. — The world watched as crowds hurled bottles, looted liquor stores and set this city on fire in the 24 hours after a grand jury announced it would not indict police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown, 18.

Some fear that images of Ferguson on fire may determine the city's fate for decades to come. Will its notoriety as a riot city mark it for rapid descent into blight like the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles or will the world's attention to its disadvantages make it a magnet for investment that breathes new life into the St. Louis suburb?

Some neighborhoods affected by riots have needed decades to shed their reputation for violence, said Walter Olson, an expert in constitutional studies and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a public policy research organization in Washington, D.C. Businesses and residents may also face more practical hurdles as they rebuild. Businesses may find it difficult to get insurance. Property values may plummet.

This Thanksgiving, Ferguson residents say they are still looking at the good side of things and feeling "thankful" despite the violence and negativity. VPC

"These reputational things become very hard to overcome even if the reality has changed and even if the danger is in the past," Olson said.

This is precisely what St. Louis Alderman Antonio French fears. French has stood alongside the protesters since the Aug. 9 shooting and said he's dismayed that destruction by a few people could overshadow the peaceful efforts of others.

"If you have been out here, you know 98% of everything that has been going on for the last over 100 days has been peaceful," French said.

The protests in Ferguson most resemble the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, said Donna Murch, a Rutgers University history professor.

"Non-violent civil disobedience is the story in Ferguson," Murch said. "This is a struggle of young people using peaceful protest to politicize the issue of killing of all black people."

In the Riverview Gardens School District, which draws children from Ferguson, assistant superintendent Bonita Jamison developed lessons for middle and high school students that compare the events in Ferguson to the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles. Johnson said she wants to help students understand the violent clashes, the police and military response and the social, economic and political issues that contribute to unrest.

"We are looking at it from a social emotional piece and what students saw visually," Jamison said.

Race will also play a powerful role in how people see Ferguson, says Beryl Satter, a history professor at Rutgers University who studies urban and cultural history. Rioting by white crowds in the 1940s against black people moving into historically white neighborhoods haven't gotten the same attention as rioting by blacks in Washington, D.C., and Chicago following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Satter said.

"We act like only black people riot," Satter said. "It's like they are violent, they riot, they tear down their own communities. ... When whites riot, we don't even know it happened. ... This is a real problem and it kind of twists the way we understand events like Ferguson."

Protester Johnetta Elzie, 25, wants Ferguson to be remembered as a community that came together to right an injustice.

"It didn't take one person to come outside and tell us it's time to care about black people dying in the streets," she said. "No one had to tell us what to do. No one told us, 'OK, the show is starting. Go outside to the streets, kids.' We just instantly did it."