



# Are We Secure Yet?

*Just What Los Angeles Needs Now —  
Improved Atomic Weapons*

By Eric Mankin

Thursday, April 30, was a day of coincidence. The event of that day most people will remember is the second day of the worst riot of this century. On that day, among countless other acts, a car carrying three men, two of them brandishing fireaxes, drove west down Wilshire Boulevard toward Fairfax Avenue, blowing its horn. At a stoplight, the two axe carriers briskly stepped out of their vehicle, walked matter-of-factly to the car stopped next to them, and, without a moment's hesitation or a wasted movement, smashed its rear and side windows in graceful, fluid strokes.

**T**elevision was full of similar images on all channels, in English, Spanish, and Korean, a flood interrupted only at 8 p.m. on NBC for the last episode of — of all conceivable last episodes — "The Cosby Show." For a large part of the past eight years, the domestic alarms and excursions of an upper-middle-class family that happened to be African-American was the single most popular show on television.

The end of the Huxtables is neatly appropriate. The black middle class they epitomized is under siege as the social ladder they precariously ascended, rung by painful rung, is being systematically dismantled.

The possibility of the Huxtables was born in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, which created an opening — no more than an opening, but an opening was all that was really needed. Through that opening, in the two and a half decades since the Watts Riots, an astonishingly talented generation of Americans, descended from people kidnapped and sold as slaves, has emerged: the Huxtable generation, if you will.

As this has taken place, though, some things have not changed at all. Specifically, the police. Dr. Louis Sullivan, one of the few black faces in the Bush administration, noted the sad fact in an interview: that there may not be a black man alive in this country who cannot tell the story of an antagonistic, dignity-denying, or life-threatening encounter with police from personal experience. That police use a totally different set of rules dealing with black Americans and white Americans. The details of this picture vary a little from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. This isn't a matter of opinion, or a feeling: it is simply true.

Which also reflects another melancholy truth: that the criminal justice system of the United States, to an utterly astonishing extent — close to 50 percent, actually — is a mechanism for the identification, classification, confinement, and control of black men. The recent study finding that not quite half the black men in the District of Columbia were involved in the justice system — as prisoners, parolees, arrestees, or other — is only the latest link in a pattern that has been as much a fixture of American life as the outsized cultural contribution.

And, in fact, the reverse side of what has been an amazing efflorescence of black culture in the past twenty years has been the emergence

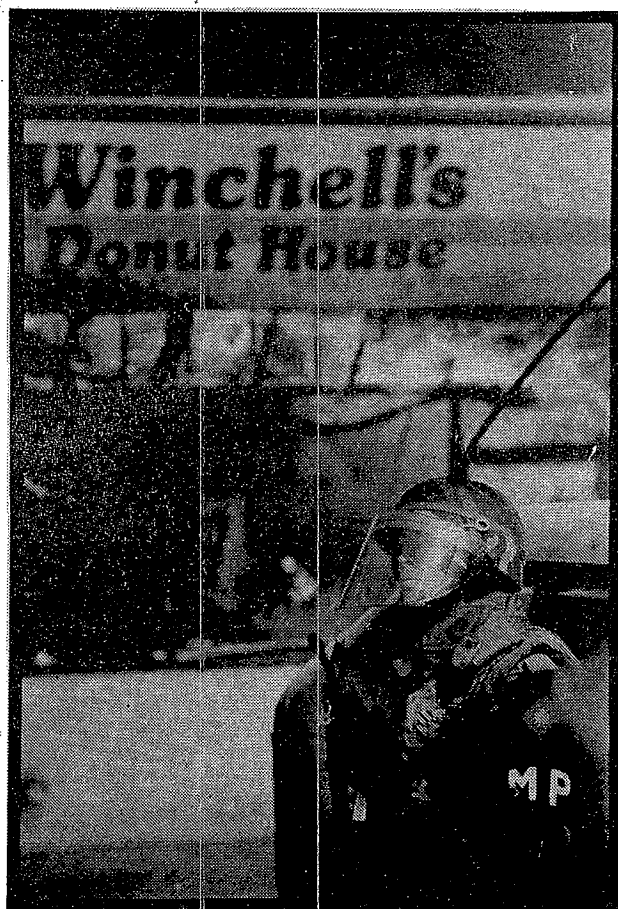
of a new bottle for the old wine of racism. The evident success of the Huxtables, of the survivors, is now taken as evidence that no barriers exist, that the United States now *is* the image presented in its integrated television commercials and *Vogue* layouts, that if Arsenio can be Arsenio, so can everyone else, that the thousands of inmates clogging the prisons (another melancholy statistic: it costs as much to keep a twenty-one-year-old black man at Folsom or Soledad as it does to keep him at Stanford) are all there because they are — in the deeply insightful words of a Republican senate hopeful — "rotten."

This expectation — that there is no excuse for any behavior except that of a patrolman beating a black man, or a storekeeper shooting a black child to death — has now collided with economic collapse, with the destruction of the social safety net, with the wholesale dismantling of the public school system, with a collapsing public health system, the general post-Reagan morning-after in America, and the deliberate inflammation of racial prejudice. And the result was visible May day.

**W**e come now to the rub, and the third leg of the coincidence. The obvious failure of institutions seen last week fell into a peculiar category of problem in public discourse: the category of problem that had to be solved without actually spending money.

Contrast this with another problem, coincidentally being tackled that same Thursday at 9:30 in the morning: In Nevada, an atomic bomb was being detonated under a desert mountain to test the ability of electronic equipment to survive in a nuclear environment. It was the second atomic test of the year, part of a planned series of such tests, which will cost far more than the riot damages. No doubts whatsoever have been raised by our government about the necessity of throwing money at this problem, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, and, just last month the declaration of the French (aside from the Chinese, the only other nation still testing nuclear weapons) that they would test no more.

"They *know* they work," a Las Vegas fry cook once said to this writer, "so why do they test those things?" The testing is officially part of a program to make us more "secure." We



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now spend something uncomfortably close to one half trillion dollars a year on such security, trying to make sure, for example, that the Russians would not be able to mount an air strike that would start four thousand fires in Los Angeles, or that Moammar Qaddafi could send a flying squad of terrorists to loot our stores and spread panic in our streets. And, in fact, it worked, in a way: no fires were reported set Thursday by Russian aircraft or Libyan terrorists.

Two weeks after the riots, had this message had gotten to Washington? On the agenda was an aircraft known as the B2, which, after years of work and billions of dollars spent, had repeatedly proved unable to perform the mission for which it was designed. This is perhaps not as big a problem as it might seem, since, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the mission *itself* no longer existed. Had this fiasco occurred in the Department of Welfare, it would be taken as evidence of the inability of government to solve problems. However, it occurred in Defense. In Security. So, mulling over these facts, in the light of the current budget crunch — and the L.A. riots — Congress decided that buying sixteen of these planes — at more than \$1 billion a copy — was no longer appropriate. It upped the order to twenty. Perhaps they — along with the two extra nuclear attack submarines ordered at \$2 billion each — can be adapted to anti-gang work.

Comes now the time after, time for reflection, time to consider what needs to be done. And the only course judged impossible off the top, out of hand, is to spend more than one or two B2s worth of money on any social issue — except possibly more prisons and police — raised by the riots. Not on schools, though the chancellor of the state university system — a crucial ladder of social mobility — says he will soon have to shut down a campus or two as an economy measure, even though the existing schools are so overcrowded that students typically wait five or even six years to graduate because required classes are overcrowded. Not on job training, not on health care — even though infant mortality in south central is at near third-world levels, for sure not on safe abortion or family planning. Innovative thinking — sure, as long as it doesn't cost money. Are we secure yet?