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From Kitty Genovese to Crown Heights

The media uproar over Crown Heights will some day be over. So will any lingering legal cases. But the state's report on the riot will never leave us. It is a powerful statement about the continuing decline of New York City, and our residents' growing capitulation to crime and civic disorder. Crown Heights will stay with us much the same way the Kitty Genovese case forever changed the way New Yorkers feel about their neighbors and their communities.

In 1964, the unanswered cries of Kitty Genovese challenged our notion of what being a neighbor means. More than 30 people ignored the screams of Genovese, a young woman who was stabbed to death on an otherwise quiet evening in Kew Gardens. Her death challenged the idea that in a civilized urban setting, you could count on your neighbor's help in a time of dire need. After her murder, alienation and isolation became emblems of the urban psyche.

Crown Heights evolves - or devolves - naturally from the Genovese case. We are largely a city of indifferent, unsympathetic strangers. Now, however, some neighbors have become enemies, members of opposing urban tribes, who'd rather hurt than help each other. As the state's Director of Criminal Justice and the author of the report, Richard G. Girgenti, noted, Crown Heights was a riot in which one community targeted another community.

When you're living right next door to danger, police officers are the average citizen's only hope for safety and security. But Girgenti's report makes clear that this new form of urban civil war may not always be addressed by the police or City Hall.

Simply put, violence aimed at the Hasidic Jewish community of Crown Heights was allowed to prevail for three consecutive days because of a "collective failure" by top-ranking NYPD officials. Emergency 911 calls were ignored; reports from community leaders were dismissed by City Hall. For the deeply religious and insular Hasidim, Crown Heights was an echo of Nazi Germany. But for all Americans, it highlights the relative ease with which civic order can break down in our cities and how institutions can no longer be counted on to stop rampant disorder.

This sense of insecurity, relatively new to middle-class whites, probably sounds depressingly familiar to city minorities. The attacks experienced by the Jews of Crown Heights have traditionally been a part of life for blacks, especially in the South where the local sheriff would often ignore the pleas of blacks for help when their homes and churches were being firebombed. (Indeed, sometimes the sheriff was one of the bombers.)

In northern cities, many minorities have complained that their communities don't receive adequate police protection, and that the police are not responsive to community priorities. The

African-American community continues to mourn Eleanor Bumpurs, who was shot rather than subdued by police in her own home. And the Dominican community in Washington Heights has rebelled twice against the police within a year.

Anger at the police also found an outlet in Crown Heights, where attacks forced them to retreat to the perimeter of the community. Mayor Dinkins himself was shouted down and pelted with bottles when he visited the scene.

Clearly, rampant disorder was the order of the day. But New Yorkers shouldn't learn the wrong lessons from Crown Heights. It's not just about the failure of leadership in City Hall and One Police Plaza. The lesson of Crown Heights is that nothing will change unless individuals and communities break the pattern of indifference - and try to build a new sense of trust.

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