



Rooftop Koreans

Rooftop Koreans or **roof Koreans** refers to the Korean American business owners and residents during the 1992 Los Angeles riots who armed themselves and took to the rooftops of local businesses to defend them. The unrest in urban areas were sparked by the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers in the beating of Rodney King and resulted in widespread violence and arson throughout the city.^{[1][2]}

Background

For years, there had been tensions between the Los Angeles Korean community and the African American communities, including the killing of Latasha Harlins, an African-American teenager who was controversially fatally shot by a Korean-American convenience store owner who received no jail time.^[3]

Events

Following the Rodney King verdict, Los Angeles police were unable to provide protection to many affected areas due to the overwhelming scale of the riots, instead opting to set up a defensive perimeter around the wealthier and typically white Beverly Hills and West Hollywood, cutting off Koreatown, leaving the Koreatown community to fend for themselves. In response, many Korean business owners and residents took matters into their own hands. Local Korean radio stations in Los Angeles put out a call to help Korean business owners, leading to volunteers to arrive with their own firearms. The intersection of 5th Street and Western Avenue served as a flashpoint, where the California Market (also called Gaju or Kaju) Korean grocery store was a major point of conflict. Other locations that were defended by citizens with firearms included 8th and Oxford, as well as Western and Third Street.^[4] *The Los Angeles Times* stated there were multiple people on the roof of the grocery with "shotguns and automatic weapons"^{[2][3]} while *Ebony Magazine* noted the use of "rifles and handguns."^[5]

Because South Korea has a two year mandatory military service for males, it was noted that many Korean immigrants had experience with handling firearms.^[6]

The actions of the rooftop Koreans sparked debates about gun control and vigilantism, while at the same time they were praised for their bravery and resourcefulness.^[7] No rioters were fatally shot by any of the Korean volunteers.^[8]

Influence

The rooftop Koreans have been cited by gun rights advocates for the value of citizen ownership of firearms and "being your own first responder."^[9] In recent years, it has also been the subject of social media memes, contributing to tensions with African American communities especially in the 2014 Ferguson unrest,^[10] the emergence of Black Lives Matter, and the increased racial tensions around Stop Asian Hate.^{[6][7]}

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External links

- Rifles on the roof - April, 1992 (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/gargoyleg/6979765848/in/photostream/>) - photo of California Supermarket during 1992 riots by Glenn Gilbert
 - The True Stories Behind The 'Rooftop Koreans' Who Took Up Arms During The L.A. Uprising (<https://allthatsinteresting.com/roof-koreans>) - *All That's Interesting*, Natasha Ishak, November 5, 2020
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