



# Letter From L.A.— A Day at the Court

An Adventist meets urban America at the trial of the four police officers charged with violating Rodney King's civil rights.

by Doug Marlow

As I approach the Edward R. Roybal Federal Building, our new federal court house at 255 East Temple, I am greeted by four silver men, 20 to 25 feet high and two inches thin, confronting each other at right angles, the sun starkly reflecting off their polished bodies filled with three- to four-inch holes. Their arms are reaching to each other's throats, and their mouths open in silent screams.

California Highway Patrol officers outside and U.S. marshals inside continually walk around monitoring everyone's activities. It is 5:30 Friday morning, April 9. The California Highway Patrol officers and U.S. marshals who constantly monitor activities in and outside the courthouse haven't arrived yet, but spectators have. I am already number 32 in line. According to an informal system worked out among the "regulars" viewing the trial, as each person arrives he or she receives a number. Through the day, a federal marshal calls out these numbers, and the people rotate through the courtroom. This being one of the final days of the trial, between 75 and 100 people have shown up. Those in front of and behind me include a free-lance film editor, a boy of 12, a professor of law, transients, a doctoral student in

psychology, and an elderly woman in a lawn chair who needs assistance to walk.

At 7:00 a.m., the building opens. I, like the others in line, pass through the first of two metal detectors. Everyone heads for the cafeteria and coffee until 8:15 a.m. The first question on everyone's mind is whether there will be rioting. "I don't believe there will be any unrest whatsoever," says a man who calls himself Heavy D. Others say that they expect limited unrest depending on the verdict. Many others expect the unrest will come when the youths accused of beating Reginald Denny go to trial.

The press comes in for a lot of criticism. Joyce, a vivacious woman visiting the trial for the past five weeks, tells me, "I don't feel that the articles I have read have reflected any kind of reality I experienced in the courtroom. Not much of what I thought was significant was reported, although I didn't read many of the articles that have come out each day."

I walk up to an African-American male in his mid-30s, with a grey goatee and dreadlocks. I learn that his name is Mark, and that he's come down here to record history. When asked what it has been like for him these past few weeks, he replies, "Inside it is very educational, you know. The media gives you bits and pieces of what they want you to know." An elderly gentleman says, "I don't know why they think informing is the objective. TV is in the enter-

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*Doug Marlow, a graduate of Pacific Union College, is completing an M.A. in theology and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.*

tainment business." A free-lance film editor delivers an authoritative, firsthand opinion: "The media is going to hell in a handbasket."

Hostility is also directed at the police. The most dramatic attack comes from a man who says that he rode with the Los Angeles Police Department three weeks before the riots last year. They were joking about how the X on the Malcolm X hats worn by young blacks makes a great target. A few feel the police have reason to be mad. This time they will be primary targets.

The news media seems to have a very different mood about this whole trial process than the few transients, senior citizens, and other observers. I am surprised at how uninvolved—even jovial—the media and technicians seem to be. There are the usual "Good mornings" as they wave their doughnuts at each other. Most of them express relief that this is almost over. When asked what it is like to be covering the trial, a CNN video operator says, "This is pretty boring stuff." While talking with reporter Greg LaMotte of CNN, we come upon his producer, who is irate because someone from headquarters is calling for a rewrite of the script and some over-dubs. "This happens all the time," the technical woman standing by assures me.

At 8:15 a.m., one of the federal marshals calls out names and numbers for seating within the courtroom. There are no second chances. If the marshal calls a number and the person is not here, the person won't get into the courtroom. Finally, at 10:00 a.m., number 32 is called. Accompanied by a federal marshal, I attempt to pass through yet another metal detector into the courtroom. This one is so sensitive I have to remove the change from my pockets and take off my belt.

The experience inside the courtroom is strikingly different from the disorganized community outside. There is not a lot of emotion or feeling expressed by jurors, defendants, or anyone else in the courtroom. Twelve jurors and three alternates sit in a double row along the left wall. At the far end of the room the judge sits behind a bench. Five rows of benches for defendants, family, press, and observers are immediately inside the door, at the rear of the courtroom. The defendants sit in the front row of seats, dressed in suits and ties, listening intently to the monologue.

**M**ichael Stone, Lawrence Powell's attorney, is already into the flow of his argument. He summarizes the medical testimony of the expert witnesses and tries to refute the testimony of others, especially that of Melanie Singer, another police

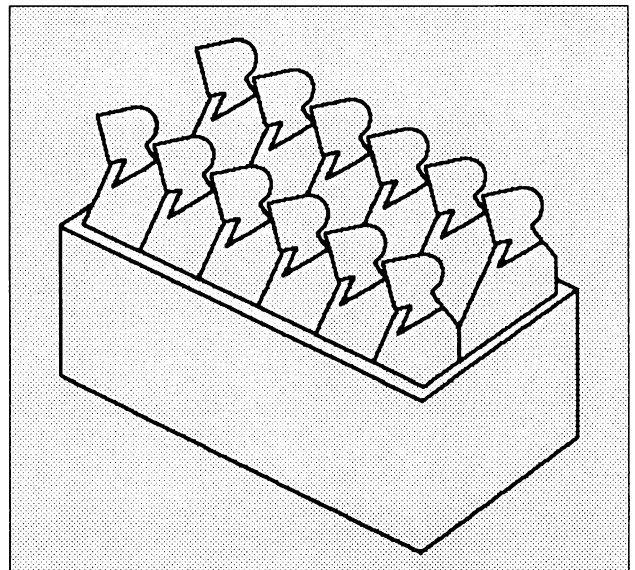
officer. A replica of a human skull sits on the defense table, and Mr. Stone uses a police baton to show that, according to his position, there were no direct head blows. If there had been, more damage would have shown up. He states that the video did not show any head blows, but glancing blows to the arm and shoulder. Mr. Stone uses a high-tech computer simulation that shows a man of Mr. King's weight falling to the ground. Attorney Stone says the abrasions and gravel removed from Rodney King's face showed that the lacerations were from Mr. King hitting the ground and not from the baton blows.

Singer's testimony, according to Stone, is inherently unbelievable. Everyone sees things that never happened, but "all the fears of Melanie Singer will not turn fantasy into reality."

The jury's hardest and biggest duty, Stone says, is "to understand the perception of the officers." He even refers to the famous video, stating that since it was taken from across the street, it did not show the special relationships of the participants to the beating. He also makes a case against the eyewitness, saying, "It [the video] influences and discounts many of [them]."

Stone claims that there would have been no beating had it not been for Rodney King and his running from the law. He says Mr. King lied on the stand and had much to gain financially from not telling the truth. Mr. King had been drunk and had a motive for running away. His attempted escape had provoked the attack.

During the brief break in Stone's argument, a Hispanic youth sitting behind me says in a stage whisper, "The cops are gangsters; they're just bangin' for the government." Cynthia, a law professor sitting



beside me, questions Stone's entire line of defense, saying that it might serve to remind the jury of the injury done to Rodney King and to highlight his plight.

As he nears his closing, Stone states that the police officers' job was to bring Rodney King into custody. If King had been allowed to get up, even on his knees, he would have presented a threat to the officers. They needed to use more force to keep him down. If they did not do it, then they would not have solved the police problem—how to bring him in. The officers needed to decide which level of

force would bring about their desired goals. "The force used," said Stone, "was ineffective. It was not powerful enough, because it did not bring him down fast enough."

On the way home from that long day of closing arguments, I puzzle over what had happened. I was still a long way from becoming part of the agony in the American experience that had produced the Rodney King beating. But perhaps today had been a beginning, the start of a pilgrimage toward involvement.