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The Political and Personal Tension between Tom Bradley and Daryl Gates

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The Political and Personal Tension between Tom Bradley and Daryl Gates

“Los Angeles in the early 1990’s was a virgining metropolis, boasting of its diversity of a world city posed to be the gateway of the pacific. Los Angeles was home to over a 100 ethnicities from all points of the globe; it was perceived to be the international city that was going to lead America into the 21st century.”¹ The city’s picturesque landscape of beautiful skyscrapers, however, hid dangerous social and racial fault lines. In only a matter of time tensions would boil over, and two key political figures, Los Angeles Police Chief, Daryl Gates and Mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley would clash over what was the right thing to do. They had a rocky relationship, and people have often speculated that Gates perceived Bradley as a political showboat that never really supported the police. Others have conjectured that Bradley never liked Gates from the start, that Gates was the last person Bradley wanted as the police chief. Yet no one would have ever predicted the political storm that was about to happen.

A Sharecropper’s Son

The Mayor, Tom Bradley was an African American born on December 29, 1917, in Calvert, Texas to Lee and Crenner Bradley.² Tom’s parents both grew up in Calvert and worked in the cotton fields as sharecroppers. Working in the cottons field required very hard hours and did not pay well, which caused his family to constantly be piling up more debt than income. The family often had to move from place to place to escape the bill collectors. Lee Bradley, Tom’s father, believed sharecropping did not promise a good future for the family. It “offered so little hope for him or his family that he wanted to get them out of Calvert, out of the oppressive social

conditions, and out of the no-win economic conditions that existed there." 3 Lee Bradley moved the family to Dallas in 1921 in search of a better life. Both Lee and Crenner took various odd and end jobs to pay the bills. After a few years in Dallas, they decided to move elsewhere because of the lack of opportunities. 4

At the age of six, Tom and his family moved to Summerton, Arizona. Their stay was short lived, only staying there for a year before moving to Los Angeles. Once they arrived in Los Angeles his father worked many jobs: waiter, cook, and a railroad porter. Tom said his father was a hard worker and “did everything and anything that he could do to earn a living.” His father traveled on boats, which caused him to be away from the family. Tom’s parents were constantly telling him to get a good education because they believed without an education; there is little likelihood of success. His parents were not fortunate enough to have a good education and only went to the 5th grade. 5

Tom excelled throughout his years in school. He received good grades and loved to read. School is where he first experienced racial prejudice. He had a friend named Billy, but one day Billy sadly told him “that his parents said that he was not to play with the colored children.” 6 This incident taught Tom the pain of racism. Another time during 9th grade the counselor of the school encouraged Bradley to take industrial courses rather than academic courses because in his words, “you ought to prepare yourself for a job. Take some studies that are going to lead you to

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4 Payne, 6.
5 Bradley interview.
6 Ibid.
manual labor because that’s about as much as you’re going to be able to hope for.”  

He was determined to go to college so he ignored the advice of his counselor. Tom’s family had always been poor, so he knew his one hope of being able to afford college was through an athletic scholarship. He excelled at track and football and received a track scholarship to UCLA.

In high school Bradley realized his talent in human relations. Whenever there was a racial problem in his high school, the principal called upon Bradley to help resolve the issue. He ran for the presidency of the Boys League, which was shocking considering he went to a mainly white school and an African American had never held the position in his school. After facing a few negative critics he eventually won the election. He then became the first African American in his school to be named to an honor society. Bradley felt his selection to the honor society helped break the discrimination against blacks in his school because many African Americans were name to different organizations soon after.

He attended UCLA on a track scholarship for a couple years, then one day a few of his friends wanted to take the exam to be a police officer. Bradley decided to take the exam with his friends since they were all doing it. Surprisingly Bradley placed a high score and was selected to become a police officer. He then went on and served 21 years in the LAPD retiring in the early 60’s. During his time in the LAPD, he said there were many racial problems. Regulations forbade white and black officers from riding in the same radio car, which caused problems because there were not many black officers to begin with and if one would go on vacation, the other officer had nothing to do because they were not allowed to work with a white policeman.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
He convinced his chief to run an experiment to team up black and white officers in radio cars. Supervisors always posted the schedule a week before the month began, and the white officers assigned to ride with black officers began to receive abuse from other white officers. Many white officers asked to be reassigned because of the abuse. Bradley said "it wasn’t until about 1963 or ’64 that the chief finally got around to announcing the policy of nondiscrimination in the assignment of radio cars."  

After his 21 years in law enforcement, Bradley retired and ran for a position on the city council in 1963. Bradley ended up winning and became the first African American elected to the council. He joined the city council because he wanted to help better his community by getting more street lights and fixing the lack of park and recreations to the communities. Bradley said that he would often go out to the communities and look himself to see what needed to be improved rather than waiting in the office for complaints from citizens. He was in charge of one district, but would often go out to the other districts that faced issues. This would often anger other councilmen who felt it was none of his business because it was outside his district. The other councilmen would eventually get used to it, but it showed he cared for other citizens in other districts, which would help his run for mayor later on in life. Bradley said after he left the city council, it became the norm for councilmen to look at other districts’ issues and problems. During his time on the city council, he often was labeled as “antipolice” because he protested many cases of police officers being involved in unnecessary shootings or police abuse. 

In 1969, Bradley ran for mayor of Los Angeles challenging incumbent mayor Sam Yorty. Bradley describes Yorty as an “absentee mayor,” who would often come in late and leave early.

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10 Bradley interview.
11 Ibid.
Yorty often traveled to different places that Bradley felt was not beneficial to the city. Bradley was ahead in all the polls leading up to the election, but Yorty’s campaign scared people into voting for him by saying the policemen will quit their jobs if Bradley’s elected. Yorty’s scare tactics worked because Bradley lost the election.  

Learning from his past mistakes, Bradley ran for a second time against Yorty in 1973. Bradley made sure everyone knew what kind of person he was by going out to every neighborhood to meet various people. He determined not to let Yorty scare voters this time around. Bradley ended up winning the election, but never would receive a concession call form Yorty. Throughout Bradley’s years as mayor, he always had a once a month open-house program, which enabled anybody to come talk to him and he would often go out to different areas of the city every month to check how things were going. His goal was to remain the consensus figure he had been since his school years, but he also intimately understood the challenges facing African-Americans and was not afraid to confront perceived injustices.

“I didn’t see the need for any police at all.”

Daryl Gates, Police Chief of the Los Angeles police department, was born on August 30, 1926, in Glendale, California. He said while growing up, his family was never rich, but had enough money to live in a spacious home. His father Paul was a plumber who did very well and his mother Arvilla was a stay at home mom who took care of Daryl and his brother Lowell. Then in 1930, his family moved because of hard times faced by many American’s during the Great Depression. They moved to the other side of Glendale to a house that was small compared

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
to their last house. Daryl said, "Suddenly, Lowell and I found ourselves sharing not only a room
but a single bed." 14

The depression caused devastation for the Gates family and many other families during
this time. Like Bradley, Gates could look back on a childhood of hardship and sacrifice. His
mother, who had been a stay at home mom her whole life, had to now find a job to help support
the family, and Daryl’s father Paul lost his job and became an alcoholic. He would often be gone
for days and randomly show up completely inebriated. Since Daryl was very young at that time,
he was often left at home with no one to care for him. Food was in short supply for them, so
they raised various animals in their back yard. Daryl and his father would also go to a certain
part of town for government handouts of food. He said, "I always felt a little embarrassed,
thinking it wasn’t right, people giving us things." 15 Already one can see an inherent
conservatism in Gates’ character.

Since Daryl’s father Paul was often drunk most of this period of his life, the senior Gates
often ran afoul of the Glendale police. One time the police came looking for Paul at the Gates’s
home. Before they could catch him, he snuck out the back door. It devastated Daryl to see his
father always in trouble with the law. After experiencing incidents with the police due to his
father’s problems, Daryl viewed the police as “smart-alecky and unnecessarily abusive. I thought
they were just a plague on society. In fact, I didn’t see the need for any policemen at all.” 16

1992), 5.
15 Ibid, 7.
16 Ibid, 7.
Finally in 1935 his father quit drinking cold turkey after being arrested for public drunkenness. 17 His father found a job with a plumbing company and this greatly improved their family life. He returned to being the good father he was before he started drinking. Yet when Daryl was old enough to drive, he was constantly getting pulled over by the cops for anything he felt the cops could get him for. He believed, “there was no bigger bully than a cop.” One night he ended up getting in big trouble when he punched a cop over a dispute about a parking ticket. Officers dragged Gates to the police station; luckily his brother Lowell knew one of the police officers and got him out of the situation. 18 While Bradley often was called upon to be a healer as a young man, Gates appeared tougher and full of resentment—personality traits that would lighten over time, but never disappear.

After high school Daryl joined the navy and sailed on the U.S.S. Ault D.D.698. His job required him to keep the guns loaded and aimed in the right direction. He actually witnessed the Japanese sign the peace treaty on the U.S.S. Missouri from his view on the U.S.S. Ault. With his GI Bill, he attended the University of Southern California and wanted to become a psychologist. After a few years he decided he did not want to be a psychologist anymore. He then enrolled in Pasadena City College and studied law where he met his wife to be Wanda Hawkins. Daryl ended up having an unplanned pregnancy with her. Instead of finishing college he had to support a family instead. 19

One of his friends mentioned he should take the exam to become a police officer. He thought, “no way in the world will I ever be a dump cop.” 20 The pay, however, was decent so

17 Ibid, 9.
18 Ibid, 12.
19 Ibid, 14.
20 Ibid, 15.
he took the exam and on September 16, 1949 became part of the LAPD. His first assignment was directing traffic. He hated the cops as a teenager, but “seeing firsthand what terrible damage motorist did to themselves, and to others, I began to understand why, as a motorist, I had been given no breaks.” 21 Gates developed a close relationship to the then new police Chief William Parker. He became his personal driver who would pick him up every morning, so he learned many things from the new chief. 22 He slowly worked his way up the ranks, he went from sergeant, to lieutenant, and then to caption in 1963. He actually became captain of the same patrol division that he was taken in for during his teenage years for punching a cop. 23

During his time in the LAPD, he experienced the Watts riots of 1965 first hand. After having such chaos during the riots Gates felt they needed to develop a team to help deal with riots like the ones that accrued at Watts. He helped develop the Special Weapons Attack Team, or SWAT. This team would go into situations like Watts and know how to deal with them. 24 On March 28, 1978, he was sworn in as the cities new chief of police. 25

**The Rivalry**

Early in Gate’s LAPD tenure, he developed an opinion of Tom Bradley based on information given to him by then chief of police, William Parker. Parker had found out from reports that Bradley, who was a LAPD officer at the time, had criticized the department and said, “unfavorable things about Parker and the LAPD.” The chief told Gates, Bradley “was an

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21 Ibid, 20.
22 Ibid, 30.
23 Ibid, 67.
24 Ibid, 114.
absolute traitor to the department.” After this incident, Parker transferred Bradley into a less trusted position.  

Gates was trying to get the job of chief of police in 1978, which was going to be the Bradley administration’s first chance to select a chief of police. The police commission chooses the chief of police in the city of Los Angeles. Bradley handpicked the commission, which enabled the mayor to have influence on who would be picked. Bradley who wanted someone different than the typical William Parker’s of the past, sent out letter to chiefs around the U.S. trying to get them to apply, which was basically a slap in the face to Gates and all the other LAPD officers trying to apply. Gates ended up scoring the highest points on the exam required to become the chief, basically forcing them to hire him as chief. After a two month decision he was sworn in as chief. He had won, but he would not forget Bradley’s opposition. Things were already off to a rocky start.  

In the late 1970’s, African Americans accusations against the LAPD picked up; in particular black activists said police used their guns unnecessarily. In 1979, two police officers shot and killed Eulia Love, an African American woman. When the police approached her about a $22.09 unpaid gas bill, they said she began to react irrationally with an 11-inch boning knife. Two and half minutes later she laid dead. Gates denied that there were any unlawful uses of guns, but Bradley disagreed with him. The mayor says he disagreed with William Parker, who

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26 Ibid, 66.  
27 Ibid, 176-77.  
was the chief of police at that time. He said Parker did not feel there were any problems with police department misconduct, and then the Watts riots happened soon after.  

During this tense period, Gates received a memo from Bradley telling him he had to cut his budget by 39 million, and Bradley recommended laying some people off. Gates claimed when he proposed the idea of laying people off to the council, Bradley “blew his stack” and blamed Gates for coming up with the idea. Gates said he was shocked when Bradley did this to him right in front of the council. Bradley and Gates constantly disagreed on the budget of the police department. Gates regularly asked for more officers to be hired, but the budget would never allow it, only when election time came around, Bradley happily gave him more officers.

World War II brought a massive migration of African Americans to California because of work available in the shipyards (the Bradleys were the first wave of this migration). There, they were joined by another growing group. The first Korean immigrants showed up in the city of San Francisco in the early 1900’s. Fifty years later Los Angeles would be the “second or third largest Korean city on the planet.” In 1965, the United States changed its immigration policy by allowing groups of people that were not allowed in the previous policy to immigrate to America. Asians took advantage of the reformed immigration policy and over the next thirty years the Asian population drastically increased. Most of the Asians emigrated from southwest Asia. “By the end of the twentieth century,” explains Kevin Starr in his seminal book *California,* “eighty-

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29 Bradley interview.
30 Gates, 181-83.
31 Ibid, 84.
plus languages in addition to English were spoken by children in the Los Angeles Unified School District.  

Then came the late 1980’s, which was a time of massive growth that added 1.4 million residents to Los Angeles, 1.3 million of them were Latino. At the same time the city was going through a lot of racial turmoil. South-Central, which was typically an African American community was now getting taken over by Latinos and Korean immigrants. Korean Americans were starting stores in South Los Angeles because the rent was low. Many African Americans resented this and “wondered how Koreans could come to this country and in no time find the capital to start their own businesses.” This brewed resentment of Koreans. It continued to build throughout the late 80’s and early 90’s. To top things off, the gap between the rich and the poor was only getting bigger and the city was struggling to find enough classroom space for the massive influx of immigrant children.

On March 3, 1991, the Rodney King video came out, which showed four white LAPD police officers excessively beating Rodney King, a black man, with their batons. The video went to all the news outlets and caused outrage among the citizens of Los Angeles. Then that same month Latasha Hardins, a 15 year old African American girl walked into a Korean owned store to buy orange juice. A fight broke out between her and a Korean store clerk, Soon Ja Du over whether Latasha tried to steal an orange juice. It ended after Soon Ja Du shot her dead. Soon Ja Du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and received 5 years probation for the shooting

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34 Ibid, 33-34.
of Hardins. This put an already tense relationship between Koreans and African Americans through the roof.

Mayor Bradley and Police Chief Gate already had a rocky relationship before the Rodney King incident, but after the incident the public saw the resentment each man held toward each other. A month after the Rodney King video tape surfaced Mayor Bradley said, “I simply will not stand by as our city is being torn apart, the LAPD’s reputation cannot be restored as long as Daryl Gates is at the center of the storm of protest. Chief Gates, now is the time for you to do the right thing for your officers, for your department, for the public you serve.” Gates responded to the call for his resignation by saying, “It’s unnecessary, totally unnecessary. The men and women of this department are expecting me to stay and provide some leadership.”

Then on April 4, 1991, the police commission scheduled a special meeting, which informed Gates that he was going to be put on a 60 day administrative leave. Gates was shocked and upset that this happened. The next day he sued the city for “violating my civil rights, my right to due process, and for causing embarrassment, humiliation, et cetera.” That same day the police commission withdrew the order against Gates as long as he dropped the lawsuit. Since tensions were high between the chief and the mayor, a mediator scheduled a meeting to settle some conflict. Gates accused Bradley of showing no support toward the police department, saying “go out and ask any police officer what he or she thinks of you, and you’ll find that they don’t think much of you at all.” Gates asked that the mayor allow him to enact his ten-point plan. He said he would as long as the chief retired after he had an opportunity to clear

38 Gates, 333-34.
his name. The chief shocked said, “Who the hell do you think you are?” Gates, obviously mad, shot back saying he would retire only if the mayor would retire too. No one would retire that day. \(^{39}\) The prominent leaders of the city, Gates and Bradley, would not talk for another 13 months, until the April 1992 riots occurred. \(^{40}\)

**The Riots**

On April 29, 1992, the city’s racial tension boiled over from the Rodney King verdict. All the police officers were found not guilty of the charges. People filled the streets protesting the verdicts, which became violent. The protest became so big the police could not control the rioters. By 9 p.m. that night Bradley declared a state of emergency and requested 2000 National Guard troops from Governor of California. \(^{41}\) For six days the parts of the city would be destroyed and looted until the chaos finally ended. 850 families were left homeless, 20,000 people were out of work due to the destruction, 45 people died and 2,383 were hurt. Estimates show that this was the costliest riots in American history, totaling up to $1 billion in damages. \(^{42}\)

Both Mayor Bradley and Chief Gates were under a lot of heat when the riots broke out. Bradley accused the LAPD of not being “equal to handle the situation.” Gates was often accused in the media of abandoning his post during the first day of the riots because he attended a fund raising event the night of April 29. He told reporters, “we were not engaged in a full-scale riot at the time.” Gates objected to federal troops being brought in, and Bradley said “I suppose it’s a matter of personal ego and experience over the time.” Bradley asked the governor of California

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\(^{39}\) Ibid, 336-38.


\(^{41}\) Staff of the *Los Angeles Times*, 62-63.

\(^{42}\) Ibid, 130.
for troops after Gates objected. Gates and Bradley had so much political tension at this time that Gates told *60 Minutes* the city would be better off if Bradley would not run for re-election the next term because he is not a strong leader. He told the television program that Bradley is “not a good leader.” He said the city needs a strong leader, and “if I don’t see that person come along, I may run.” Gates never would run, but it was an insult to the mayor. 43

In Gates memoir, the chief even questioned the mayor’s integrity by saying, “many people have this picture of the mayor as a brilliant man, a great leader who loves the city, has the highest moral principles, and is totally committed to the underdog and the needy. This description may have fit him at one time, but not anymore. In recent years his probity has been questioned repeatedly.” 44

The personal and political tension between the two individuals constantly showed throughout their tenures as political figures. Daryl Gates would eventually retire from the LAPD in June 1992 because he wanted to, not because others wanted him out. The next summer Mayor Bradley would retire and not run for another term. The chief and mayor experienced the toughest times of Los Angeles: the Watts Riots of 1965, Latasha Hardins’s Murder, the Rodney King tape, and the April 1992 riots. They never were fond of each other from the start, and every little conflict since then slowly created more political tension. People have often speculated that if the two men could have set aside their egos, the city would have been better off during the riots. If the two men had been communicating previously, they could have established a good plan of attack, rather than apposing each others. Even on Chief Gates’s retirement day,

Bradley would get one last jab at him by saying Gates "‘brought Los Angeles to the brink of disaster just to satisfy his own ego’ and is leaving a ‘sad and bitter legacy.’" 45 This just goes to show, the political tension between these two men, rooted in personalities and very different backgrounds, would be taken to the grave.

I. Primary Sources

A. Books


This book is the autobiography of former L.A. Police Chief, Daryl Gates. It explains his life from birth, up to his retirement in the L.A.P.D. This source was greatly used throughout the paper to help the readers understand Daryl Gates’s background, and personal beliefs. It is a very strong source because it helps the readers understand his personal views of Tom Bradley and how they developed over the years.

B. Oral History

UCLA library, Center for Oral History Research

Thomas Bradley Interview, 1984

This is an oral history interview conducted by Bernard Galm. He interviews Tom Bradley throughout 1978 and 1979. Galm asks questions about Bradley’s entire life, which enables readers to get a good view of Tom Bradley’s upbringing and personal views on various people that have entered his life. It was used in the paper to help the readers better understand Bradley’s life. He discusses growing up poor, his entry into the L.A.P.D. and his life in politics. He also talks about his feuds with Daryl Gates, which helps show the tension between the two leaders.

C. Newspapers

*Chicago Tribune*, 1991

The *Chicago Tribune* had an article that said Bradley had asked Gates to resign. The article was used in the paper to show the tension between Bradley and Gates was building to the point that Bradley was asking for Gate’s resignation.


The articles used explained some of the L.A.P.D.’s use of guns was excessive at times towards African Americans. The article was used in the paper because Bradley argues that the police department used guns unnecessary sometimes against minorities and this article spotlights his arguments.


The articles used from the *New York Times* shows the mayor criticizing the police chief for his slow actions during the 1992 L.A. Riots. It was used in the paper to help build the tension between the two individuals.
II. Secondary Sources

A. Books


This is a biography written about Tom Bradley. It shows his life from birth all the way up to his position as mayor. The book was used in the paper to help better understand the life of Tom Bradley, so the readers could understand how Bradley grew up in a very poor family and developed the views he had.


This is a book that shows why the 1992 Los Angeles riots happened. It was used in the paper because people needed to understand the racial tension of the city at that time. L.A. was incredibly diverse and the readers need to understand that there was a lot of racial tension right before the riots broke out.


This book is about the history of the city of Los Angeles. It tells of how the city was developing into the melting pot that it is today. It was used in the paper to help develop the readers' understanding on why there was racial tension developing in the city.

B. Websites


This website is devoted to Tom Bradley's life and achievements. It was used in the paper to find exact dates and ages of Bradley when he achieved specific milestones in his life. It helped better organize the time frame of the paper.

C. Documentary


This documentary is about the L.A riots. It discusses reasons why the riots developed and talks to important people of the time. It was used in the paper to help the reader better understand the dynamics of the city at that time.
Eastern Illinois’s Booth Library was great when it came to writing this research paper. I have never been good at finding sources for papers, but with the help of Reference Librarian Pamela Ortega, I was able to find an abundant amount of resources. Dr. Wehrle, my teacher for Historical Research and Writing, took us over to the library to have a three day session with Pamela Ortega. In this three day session she taught us how to use Booth Library’s great wealth of resources. She showed us how you can search for a specific subject using databases like “Lexis-Nexis” and many others. I was having a hard time finding sources for my subject and she showed me how I could put key words in quotes to get journal articles about those specific words.

She also showed me a great database for newspaper articles. This helped greatly in my paper because I was able to use archived articles from the *Los Angeles Times* through a database I was shown. She also showed us that even if Booth Library does not have the specific book or article we needed, it can be order through “I-Share.” It was used a lot in my research paper because many of the books I needed, Booth Library did not have. With the help of Pamela Ortega, I was able to find one of my most valuable resources, an oral history interview of Tom Bradley, which was a resource that came from the library of UCLA. If it was not for the wealth of resources Booth Library provides, I would not have been able to write the excellent research paper that I did.