

# 1992: Rioting in Los Angeles

## Examining the Sequence of Events, Protocol And Ultimate Call to Send in the Marines

By Cpl Kyle Daly, USMC

Chad Cole had a horrible hangover.

On a Friday morning in May 1992, the 19-year-old lance corporal stood in a large formation on a parade deck at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in Southern California. His “Charlies” displayed a single ribbon on his chest. A trip to the dry cleaner the previous day to pick up the uniform had turned into a night of underage drinking at a bar with a fellow Marine. The next morning, Cole had woken in the cab of a truck, outside the house of a woman the other Marine had spent the night with.

Determined not to miss the early morning formation, they rushed back to base with Cole vomiting out the truck’s window along the way. Cole, a Texas native, was a rifleman in 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. Dehydrated and suffering from a painful headache, the teenager only had to keep his bearing through the formation. He and the other Marines on the parade deck—the entire 1st Marine Regiment made up of Operation Desert Storm veterans—were expecting to be cut loose for a three-day weekend.

But that liberty, and Cole’s opportunity to nurse his hangover, never came.

Cole describes that morning, including

the awful hangover, in his self-published book, “The Dirty Little Wars: A Marine in the Los Angeles Riot and Somalia,” which details his time as a Marine Corps “grunt” during the 1990s. Regimental commander Colonel Clifford Stanley addressed the formation Cole stood in that day, telling the Marines about their new mission.

“After the usual congratulatory remarks, Stanley informed 3/1 that we had been organized into a special purpose Marine Air/Ground Task Force (MAGTF), assigned to Operation Peacekeeper, Los Angeles,” Cole writes.

Cole, now in his late 40s, spoke to



**U.S. Marines in riot gear build a human wall during a riot control class as part of Exercise Cooperative Osprey '98 at Marine Corps Base, Camp Lejeune, N.C., on June 4, 1998. Marines from 3/1 and 1st LAR received similar training only the day before they responded to the Los Angeles riots in 1992.**



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**A convoy of Marines from MCB Camp Pendleton moves up I-5 on May 1, 1992.**



COURTESY OF CHAD COLE

**Chad Cole, 3rd Bn, 1st Marines, is pictured here on liberty in Reno, Nev., following training in Bridgeport, Calif., during the summer of 1992.**

*Leatherneck* about the experience and how his first real-world operation as a Marine began following a night at the bar.

“It’s so crazy how that happened,” he said. “I really was hung over that next day. It was a horrible hangover.”

Later that evening, President George H.W. Bush would inform the entire country about what Col Stanley had told the Marines. They were “to help restore order” to the streets of Los Angeles, where rioting had taken place after city police officers earlier that week were acquitted of charges that they had used excessive force when arresting a Black man named Rodney King.

King had led LA police officers on a high-speed chase in March 1991. When the officers stopped the vehicle, a nearby resident recorded his arrest with a video camera. The video showed King being beaten with batons and kicks. The video was later given to the media and fueled a national conversation about police brutality toward the Black community. When the officers were acquitted more than a year later, on Wednesday, April 29, 1992, anger turned to rage. Violence erupted in the streets of Los Angeles.

By the time Cole and the other Marines

of his regiment had gathered for formation at Pendleton’s Camp Horno on Friday, May 1, the violence had resulted in 31 deaths, more than 1,000 injuries, and about 3,800 structure fires.

“It was a pretty quick turnaround between that formation that morning to

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the time we were on white school buses going up I-5,” Cole said.

The Marines from 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines and 1st Light Armored Infantry Battalion, would head to a staging area at Marine Corps Air Station Tustin, about 30 miles southeast of Compton, a city

where rioting and looting had taken place. With media watching, the Marines received riot control training and prepped for their entrance into the streets of LA. They wouldn’t move into the city until Saturday, May 2.

The California National Guard had already responded to the streets at the order of Governor Pete Wilson. On May 2, the Guard was federalized, and federal troops, from both the Army and Marine Corps, were called to restore order.

President Bush had invoked the Insurrection Act, an old law that allows the commander in chief to use the military on U.S. soil in response to civil disturbances.

The Insurrection Act has not been used since the riots of 1992, but the possible deployment of federal troops on American soil was again a topic of conversation this year when protests and rioting erupted over the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer in Minnesota. Conversations and opinion pieces over whether President Donald Trump should or should not deploy federal troops in response to the protests referenced President Bush’s call to send in Marines and other troops in 1992.

In an opinion piece published by *The New York Times* in early June, Republican

**At sunrise, a lone pedestrian walks by the burned-out shell of a J.J. Newberry building at Vermont Avenue near 59th Street in Los Angeles, April 30, 1992.**

Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas wrote that “an overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter law-breakers” would be needed to restore order to American streets. Sen. Cotton called upon President Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act. He referenced past instances in which the act had been used, including 1992.

“[President Bush] acknowledged his disgust at Rodney King’s treatment—‘what I saw made me sick’—but he knew deadly rioting would only multiply the victims of all races and from all walks of life,” Cotton wrote.

C.J. Chivers, a *New York Times* reporter and a Marine Corps officer who deployed to the streets of Los Angeles, also wrote an opinion column for the paper, arguing that President Trump didn’t need to deploy federal troops because, unlike 1992, the police today are equipped with more sophisticated weapons and gear than even the Marines possessed during the LA riots.

Chivers, a company commander at the time, wrote in the column that the Marines “did learn one thing fast” when they were sent to LA.

“The Marines’ presence in greater Los Angeles during roughly the next week—part of an operation that included soldiers from the Army’s Seventh Light Infantry Division as well—felt unnecessary,” Chivers wrote.

That feeling Chivers describes of not being needed stems from the fact that by the time the Marines arrived on May 2, the rioting, looting and other violence that had been playing out on TV during the previous days were over.

In his book, “Fires and Furies,” Major General James D. Delk, who oversaw the California National Guard’s response to the riots, wrote that by Saturday morning, things had calmed down.

“Fires were all but out, though many were still smoldering,” Delk wrote. “There was shooting at night, but that occurs every night. As a consequence of the return to relative normalcy, law enforcement officers were finally starting to catch up on their sleep.”

Delk adds that by Saturday, senior military officials were moving into the next phase of their response, which was,



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as one colonel described it, “basically buying back the streets and creating a sense of order ... confidence on the part of the people that the streets are now safe.”

### **“It Wasn’t a Fix”**

Whether it was necessary to send in the U.S. Marines and other federal troops in response to the violence that erupted on the streets of LA in 1992 was a question debated both before and immediately after Gov. Pete Wilson, a veteran Marine himself, requested federal assistance.

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Today, even with the history of the riots in clearer focus, the question remains. Answers vary based on perspective.

“I think it probably was not really necessary,” said Eric Bailey, who worked as a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times* during the riots. “That said, I think it

allowed for the very rattled populace of LA a sense of stability.”

Bailey, a reporter who embedded with the Marines in LA, told *Leatherneck* that judging the situation only from the “boredom” experienced by federal troops during their largely uneventful multi-day deployment on American soil, the presence of Marines wasn’t needed.

“But, in the bigger sense of all that was going on, hey, better safe than sorry,” he said.

Providing a sense of stability was something that Lance Blyth recalled from his experience as a company executive officer during the 1992 response. Blyth, then a Marine first lieutenant, remembers a Vons grocery store near Compton being able to reopen because the troops were on the streets.

“I remember going there and standing outside talking with the manager of the store as people were coming in, and they were thanking the Marines for being there,” he said. “They were there, so the store reopened.”

Blyth added, “The average citizen we encountered were grateful.”

Chad Cole, who patrolled LA’s streets as a lance corporal, said the circumstances have to be “pretty dire” for federal troops to be sent in, and that they should be a last resort.

“I believe in law enforcement,” he said. “I believe that if the law enforcement

were not capable of doing a job, then yeah, you need to call in the National Guard. And then if the National Guard is not able to the job, and then maybe the situation calls for federal troops to come in.”

Dwight Sterling, an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California’s law school and a member of the California National Guard, said that in terms of what the federal troops are trained to do, fight in combat against an enemy, their deployment to American streets didn’t fit.

“One might argue that as you look back at what occurred there, and how the Marines were used, and what they did when they were deployed, it wasn’t a fix,” Sterling said. “It comes down to what’s the training of the force you’re utilizing.”

The approximately 1,500 Marines who deployed to LA, many of them veterans of Operation Desert Storm, were not trained to quell riots or respond to civil disturbances.

So why were the Marines used?

The decision to use federal troops was partly due to California Gov. Wilson’s lack of faith in the Guard to get the job done, according to MG Delk’s book. By Thursday, April 30, it was clear that the National Guard had been caught un-

prepared, with weapons and equipment delays, and that leaders were beginning to believe the Guard’s response was too slow.

That day, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley first brought up the possibility of using federal troops during a meeting with local and state officials.

Delk writes that Warren Christopher, who would become Secretary of State in the Clinton administration and who had chaired the commission investigating the LAPD after the Rodney King beating, had called Mayor Bradley and urged him to use federal troops, arguing that “the National Guard is less effective than federal troops for riots,” according to Delk’s book. With Bradley’s permission, Christopher began to make calls to Washington.

Bradley, Gov. Wilson, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Colin Powell, and President Bush became involved with those calls.

What eventually followed was Wilson’s request for federal assistance and then a proclamation by President Bush calling for all looters and rioters in Los Angeles to disperse as required by the Insurrection Act. President Bush issued an executive order in which he authorized federal troops and federal law enforcement to “suppress the violence described in the

proclamation and to restore law and order.”

A Pentagon spokesman would later tell reporters that the Marines from Camp Pendleton were partly chosen because of their geographic proximity to the violence.

According to a *Los Angeles Times* report, GEN Powell told President Bush that the most prepared federal troops were the Army’s Ready Brigade of the 7th Infantry Division based in central California at Fort Ord in Monterey and a battalion of Marines from I Marine Expeditionary Force based at Camp Pendleton.

### “We Can Adapt”

Cole, the lance corporal in 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, recalls receiving a “crash course” in riot control training at the Marine air station in Tustin, where the Marines were staged before moving into the streets.

With camera crews and other members of the media watching, Cole said he and the other Marines received riot gear and learned different riot control formations.

Although the training was quick, Cole didn’t see that as a problem for the Marines.

“I think that because we’re Marines, we can adapt, we can learn to follow

## The Law: At a Glance

The following information comes directly from a January 2020 Congressional Research Services report.

### Using the Military to Enforce Civilian Law

Under the Constitution, states retain the primary responsibility and authority to provide for civil order and the protection of their citizens’ lives and property.

However, the federal government is responsible for protecting states against invasion and insurrection, and, if the state (through the legislature governor) requests it, protection against “domestic violence.”

### Posse Comitatus Act (PCA)

The act outlaws the use of the Army or Air Force to execute the law unless expressly authorized by the Constitution or an act of Congress. The Navy and Marine Corps operate under similar restrictions pursuant to regulations.

Statutory exceptions include legislation that allows the President to use military force to suppress insurrection or to enforce federal authority and laws that permit the Department of Defense to provide federal, state, and local police with information, equipment, and personnel.

Case law indicates that “execution of the law” in violation of the PCA occurs (1) when civilian law enforcement officials

make “direct active use” of military investigators; or (2) when the use of military “pervades the activities” of the civilian officials; or (3) when the military is used to subject “citizens to the exercise of military power which was regulatory, prescriptive, or compulsory in nature.” However, the PCA is not violated when the Armed Forces conduct activities for a military purpose. Additionally, the PCA does not apply to the National Guard unless it is employed in federal service.

### The Insurrection Act

Insurrections against state governments could be put down under the act only if the state legislature applied for such assistance.

These provisions were quickly extended to allow for the employment of the Armed Forces in domestic circumstances where the law already provided the militia could be employed.

After the Civil War, Congress added a new provision for the use of federal military forces to protect civil rights.

The Insurrection Act has been invoked on dozens of occasions through U.S. history, although its use since the end of the 1960s civil rights disturbances has become exceedingly rare. Its last invocation appears to have occurred in 1992 when the acquittal of police officers on charges of beating motorist Rodney King sparked rioting in Los Angeles.

instructions immediately,” he said. “It’s all about immediate response to orders. Do what you’re told when you’re told to do it. So, when you’re focused that way, you can learn something on the fly pretty quickly.”

Bailey, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter, was among the crowd of media members and one of the few “notepad carrying reporter types” from a newspaper who had gathered at the air station to observe the Marines preparing to take the streets.

Bailey was based at the *Times*’ Orange County office, which is south of LA and an area that had been “quiet as a church mouse” during the riots, he said. When word came that the Marines were being called to respond, he was eager to get in on the action.

The reporter had previously written about the Marine Corps and military for another newspaper based in Oceanside, near Camp Pendleton. Unlike other reporters, he joined the convoy of Marines that rode into the cities of LA County.

“I was one of the only people going in with them,” he said. “Everyone else, the TV types, they weren’t taking the time to do it.”

Bailey joined the troops of “India” Company as they traveled into Compton, dropping off men at various spots. In an article published on Monday, May 4, the main theme of the deployment was captured in the headline for Bailey’s article: “For Marines in LA, it’s a Battle With Boredom.”

One of the Marines Bailey met was 1stLt Lance Blyth, the executive officer of India Co. Blyth, who today serves as a command historian at North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command, also remembers the deployment being uneventful.

He said they relieved members of the National Guard and worked with local law enforcement officials who told them what places and businesses needed protecting.

“What we really did was free up their officers to respond,” Blyth said. “In any place where they needed to have someone sit or stand, that’s what we did. Just to be seen. Just to have a presence.”

Though Marines like Blyth didn’t see any action on the streets of LA, reports of

attempted assaults on military members did occur.

Delk’s book includes an appendix that logs the various attempted assaults on military members. The California National Guard reported most of these activities, but there are a few recorded instances of “sniper shots” and “drive-by” shootings at Marines.

One instance that has become a cautionary tale about federal troops working



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**Marines at a staging area at Alameda and Elm Streets in Compton, May 3, 1992.**

**“In a time of chaos and pandemonium, you look at what kind of decisions were made by our government officials, and when they’re afraid, they’re going to act from their fear.”**

**—Dwight Sterling**

with civilian law enforcement is recorded in Delk’s book. It involved a group of Marines and two Compton police officers who were responding to a domestic disturbance at a local residence. When the officers approached the door of the residence, two shotgun rounds burst through the door, striking the officers, Delk writes.

One of the policemen yelled “Cover me!” to the Marines. The Marines then opened fire on the residence.

“The officer had not meant shoot when he yelled ‘cover me’ to the Marines,” Delk writes. “The term ‘cover me’ meant the same to him as it does to Army (or Army National Guard) soldiers. That is, point your weapon and be prepared to respond if necessary. However, the Marines responded instantly in the way they had been trained, where ‘cover me’ means ‘provide me with cover using firepower.’”

By Sunday, May 10, the National Guard was defederalized and the Marines returned home.

### **“There’s a Line”**

Any argument for sending federal troops into American streets comes with an examination of two federal laws.

One law, the Posse Comitatus Act, restrains the federal government from using the military to enforce civilian laws. Its helps maintain civil liberties and the governing independence of individual states. The law does not apply to the National Guard unless the Guard is federalized.

But the Posse Comitatus Act has exceptions, and one of those exceptions is if a state requests help from the federal government or if president deems it necessary to send in troops to suppress an insurrection. This exception is called the Insurrection Act.

Sterling, a reserve Judge Advocate General officer in the California National Guard, said that from a legal standpoint, the 1992 riots were not, in his opinion, an event that called for the president to invoke the Insurrection Act.

He explained, however, it is our national and state leaders who decide what is an insurrection and what is not.

“You have on the one hand the Posse Comitatus Act that says they can’t enforce the law,” he said. “That’s the job of the police and the National Guard in state status. Then you have on the extreme side, the fact that they can protect the government in the face of insurrection. Well, what’s an insurrection and what’s civil unrest? And that gets into a gray area.”

He added, “That’s in the eye of the beholder.”

Sterling, who is the chief executive of-



GYSGT CLINTON FIRSTBROOK - USMC

**Training in riot control, the use of nonlethal weapons and dealing with civil unrest is regularly included prior to deployments today. A platoon sergeant with Marine Rotational Force-Europe 18.1 analyzes response techniques during non-lethal training at Vaernes Garrison, Norway, April 3, 2018.**

ficer of the Center for Law and Military Policy, a nonprofit think tank based in Southern California, said in terms of the 1992 riots, “we didn’t get to the point where we went from enforcing the law in terms of civil unrest to the point of an insurrection where then we are able to tap into the authorities of the Insurrection Act.

“There’s a line there,” he said. “And I can’t see how we passed by that line to get to insurrection.”

Sterling said he thinks that “fear” ultimately fueled the decision.

“In a time of chaos and pandemonium, you look at what kind of decisions were made by our government officials, and when they’re afraid, they’re going to act from their fear, and they’re going to say ‘well, we have a force that can be used in the case of a true emergency’ so I would contend they simply panicked, and they broke the glass, and they reached into that case, and they went to the members of the Marine Corps,” he said.

In his book, MG Delk writes that federal troops and the federalized National Guard had their hands tied in terms of

what they could do with law enforcement officials on the streets. The military showed great restraint as it attempted not to get involved with the enforcement of civilian law. A 2018 Congressional Research report suggests that this was due to a misunderstanding of Posse Comitatus. The troops, in fact, could have played a more active role in law enforcement activities since the president invoked the Insurrection Act.

“After the military force was federalized, many changes were made,” Delk writes. “The change that had the greatest impact on law enforcement was the refusal to perform most law enforcement functions.”

### **“Mental Walk-Through”**

After the Los Angeles riots, Chad Cole would eventually deploy to Somalia and earn the rank of sergeant meritoriously. He described himself as a motivated Marine who loved to pass knowledge to the junior Marines.

Cole said his short deployment in Los Angeles prepared him for Somalia in the way of being prepared for the unknown.

“They throw us in a situation where we may not have all the variables,” Cole said. “We may not have all the information we need, but we figure it out on the fly. We make basic assessments. And as we gather more information, we can improve upon our decision making. We learn from our mistakes, big and small.”

Blyth, the veteran Marine and command historian for NORAD and USNORTHCOM, said historical events, such as the 1992 riots can provide a person with a “mental walk-through.”

“I think that is the value of history,” he said. “It gives you fundamentally a mental immediate action drill. Professionals think through the bad things that are going to happen and what they are going to do.”

*Author’s bio: Cpl Daly is a Southern California native who joined the Marine Corps after working as an editor and reporter for various publications, including the Pacific Daily News in Guam. In 2019, he won the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation’s Tom Bartlett Award for Outstanding Writing.*