



Dr. Arthur Johnson:
"You do not find blacks running to Farrakhan."

Holding A Torch

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It is the sound of sirens and glass breaking that will always haunt Dr. Arthur Johnson, the former president of the Detroit NAACP and a retired vice-president for university relations at Wayne State University.

Thirty years later, sitting in his apartment overlooking the Detroit River, Johnson is still saddened by the memory of driving down Twelfth Street with U.S. Rep. John Conyers in an unsuccessful attempt to stop the rioters.

However, in assessing the long-term impact of what he describes as a "tragedy," Johnson is able to point out a few positives. "[The riots] brought [the white community] to a great awakening to the depth of despair and anger and alienation that many African-Americans felt in the community," he said. "Many in the business community began to realize for the first time how little attention they had given to the oppressed black community here."

That despair stemmed from years of job discrimination, housing segregation and underemployment, said Johnson, who added that in the years preceding the riots, blacks often found themselves training whites who then were promoted over them.

A charter member of New Detroit, a coalition of business and community leaders founded in response to the riots, Johnson was initially heartened to see "ordinary black men and women" at the table with corporate powerhouses.

However, despite spurring initial pledges to rebuild the city, Johnson points out that ultimately the riots simply led to further urban neglect and racial polarization. It is only now, under the leadership of Mayor Dennis Archer, that Detroit is actually being rebuilt, said Johnson, although he added that Mayor Coleman Young — despite his lack of popularity in the white community — made some contributions as well.

"What was already taking place in the way of white flight from Detroit was exacerbated [after 1967]," he said. "The pace of flight was quickened, and a peculiar kind of racial thinking began to develop here: that Detroit didn't matter and

[the white community] could indeed afford to throw it away."

As the first African-Americans to move into the Green Acres neighborhood in northwest Detroit, Johnson's family witnessed white flight firsthand.

"As days and months passed, my children would come in and say, 'One more white family has moved.'" Today, Johnson — who now lives with his wife in an apartment downtown — estimates that the old neighborhood is 85 percent black.

Johnson says he was disappointed to see Jews join other whites in leaving the city.

"The most costly insult to black-Jewish relations has come with the movement of Jewish populations en masse away from the city," he said. "It is difficult to see how black-Jewish relations can be significantly improved from a distance. But we can't afford to give up."

He recognizes that other obstacles — like anti-Semitic leader Louis Farrakhan and disputes over affirmative action — have divided Jews and blacks in recent years. But he feels that black anti-Semitism — and Farrakhan — have been greatly exaggerated by the media and, perhaps, by Jewish organizations as well.

"You do not find blacks running to Farrakhan," said Johnson. "He is not the chosen leader and is not going to be the chosen leader because the majority of the black population is not Muslim, not moving to the Muslim faith and not likely to move to the Muslim faith. [There is also] a regimentation in Farrakhan's organization that is not attractive to most blacks."

Johnson is critical of the national Anti-Defamation League's investigation several years ago of black anti-Semitism.

"Had the NAACP done a similar study of racism among Jews, the Jewish community would have felt that in a different way," he said. "We are historically neighbors and friends, and you don't investigate your neighbors."

Despite the tensions between the communities, Johnson is not ready to give up on the relationship.

"Blacks and Jews have a history that cannot be denied," he said. "It is a history in which each group has suffered terribly tragic consequences. I don't know how blacks and Jews are going to become closer, but I know we must. And I believe that we will find a way to do it." □