

Is it a Riot or a Civil Disorder? Who Decides?: Walt Bodine, Lena Rivers Smith, Tom Leathers (Walt Bodine Collection)

Host [Bodine?]: ... I think this is a good place to discuss, what are the problems covering a riot situation if we're going to call it that, a civil disorder, you pick your own word. Anyway, there is plenty going on, on a certain Wednesday night, let's say, and how do you cover it? Are you guys trying to cover it from behind cars, with guns going, "Well, I suppose you can see something from there." What do you see? One block. That's not the whole story. I wonder, how you do?

Mike: I take issue with one point, Walt. I don't think you pick your own word, when you decide whether it's a riot, civil disorder, upheaval or racial unrest. At least, this is my philosophy, I think, as in anything else you're trying to maintain an objective position, quoting sources, reporting information compiled by official agencies, and you wait for the official word, and the word in Kansas City was "riot".

Host: I'm not talking about that night; I'm talking about what in retrospect we're calling it.

Mike: Well, and in retrospect. You look in Washington, Washington DC where they had the blocks burn and then ...(unintelligible) many times we had. They never did call it a riot. It becomes a question of semantics in a way ... (unintelligible) and after it was over there was a meeting or a convention there in town where one of the newspapers for the first time used the word "riot". And, people said in the phone calls we got here days later. They said in essence, in Kansas City we have an upheaval, unrest, or a civil disobedience. They have riots in Detroit, Chicago, Washington, Tallahassee and other places. No one seems as though they want to admit that we have the worst of all things occurring here, our own city. I think there is a lot of civic pride that many people feel they have to swallow when they use a word like "riot" and they don't like to use it.

Lena: I think there's a difference.

Host: What else?

Lena: I think initially we used the word "disturbance" in our station and subsequently we've used "civil disorders" and it's not just a question of semantics. I think there is a great difference in what you are conveying to your listener or your reader, and the word "riot" has connotations of something more terrible than Kansas City has seen, I think, the...

Host: Bad as it was, in other words...

Lena: Yes, Kansas City does not compare with what happened in Detroit and I think that your choice of words does not come, again, from the officials. I think that we have responsibility to use judgement ourselves.

Host: You know, in the long run it can be what the public calls it. That's what's gonna... We'll be back right after this word.