



Murder Is the Charge: The True Story of Mayor Charlie Robertson and the York, Pennsylvania, Race Riots

William C Costopoulos, Brad Bumsted

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Eleven days of hell was how those charged with restoring order to York, Pennsylvania, described the July 1969 riots. The false accusation of a young African American boy against a group of white gang youths--a charge that fell like a match to straw in the already racially charged atmosphere --incited mayhem that quickly escalated from throwing rocks to indiscriminate shooting between blacks and whites. With the city out of control, then Governor Raymond Shafer called in the National Guard. In the end, the toll came to two dead--Henry Schaad, a white police officer, and Lillie Belle Allen, a young black woman--untold numbers wounded, enormous destruction of property, and a ruptured community. Though the shooters of Schaad and Allen were known at the time, in the interest of preserving a fragile peace, the district attorney declined to prosecute a case for the killings.

Fast-forward to May 17, 2001, when York Mayor Charlie Robertson, a former police officer on duty during the riots, is arrested and, later, on the steps of City Hall, chokes out the words: "Murder . . . murder . . . murder is the charge!" The prosecution's chief witness accused Robertson of handing out .30-06 shells to white gang members, instigating them to kill, during the hot night of July 21, 1969, but the witness was himself a corrupt and uncorroborated source with an otherwise faulty memory. In fact, pathologists who examined Lillie Belle Allen's body determined that a slug from a 12-gauge shotgun, not .30-06 ammunition, had taken her life. Moreover, Charlie was not even at the scene when the fatal shot was fired. During the carnage that was the 1969 riots, the one and only misdeed a now-repentant Charlie was guilty of was raising his fist in the air and yelling "white power" in Farquhar Park, two days after the death of Officer Schaad. But, despite tainted testimony, the deaths of key witnesses after a lapse of thirty-two years, the loss of crucial evidence, and the erosion of memories, Charlie Robertson stood charged with the murder of Lillie Belle Allen.

Thus, in the effort to right a long-ago wrong, another grievous one is committed. And now the jackals--as defense attorney and author William C. Costopoulos describes the media in this biting account of his most challenging case--go to work. Building the case against Robertson, editorials demand his resignation as mayor of York. Asked by the chairman of the York Democratic Party to withdraw from his race for reelection as mayor, then underway, Charlie complies, but refuses to resign his current term: "nobody was going to take that from him." The life of Charlie Robertson, who grew up in York and devoted his life to serving his beloved White Rose City, lies in ruins.

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