

SUMMERHILL: RIOT OR REBELLION?



A comparative analysis of the events that transpired at
Summerhill on September 6, 1966

WHAT HAPPENED IN SUMMERHILL?

In his memoir, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, Ivan Allen Jr. retells the events that occurred at Summerhill on September 6, 1966. In this chapter, dramatically titled "**Riot**," Allen constructs a narrative that discredits the grievances of Black Atlantans in Summerhill and portrays their hardships as self-inflicted. Primary sources in the Ivan Allen Digital Archive tell a counter narrative that describes the events in Summerhill as the culmination of years of systemic injustice. Our ability to compare the retelling of Summerhill from the perspective of Allen and SNCC sheds light on the inconsistencies in the narratives and the rhetoric of racism, which makes it clear that Allen was strategic in his construction of the chapter. Allen aims to emerge as the hero of the events in Summerhill by villainizing the Black residents of Summerhill, and by delegitimizing SNCC as outsiders and radicals, therefore strengthening his message that "what [he] did in the field of racial progress had to be the major accomplishment of [his] administration" (91).

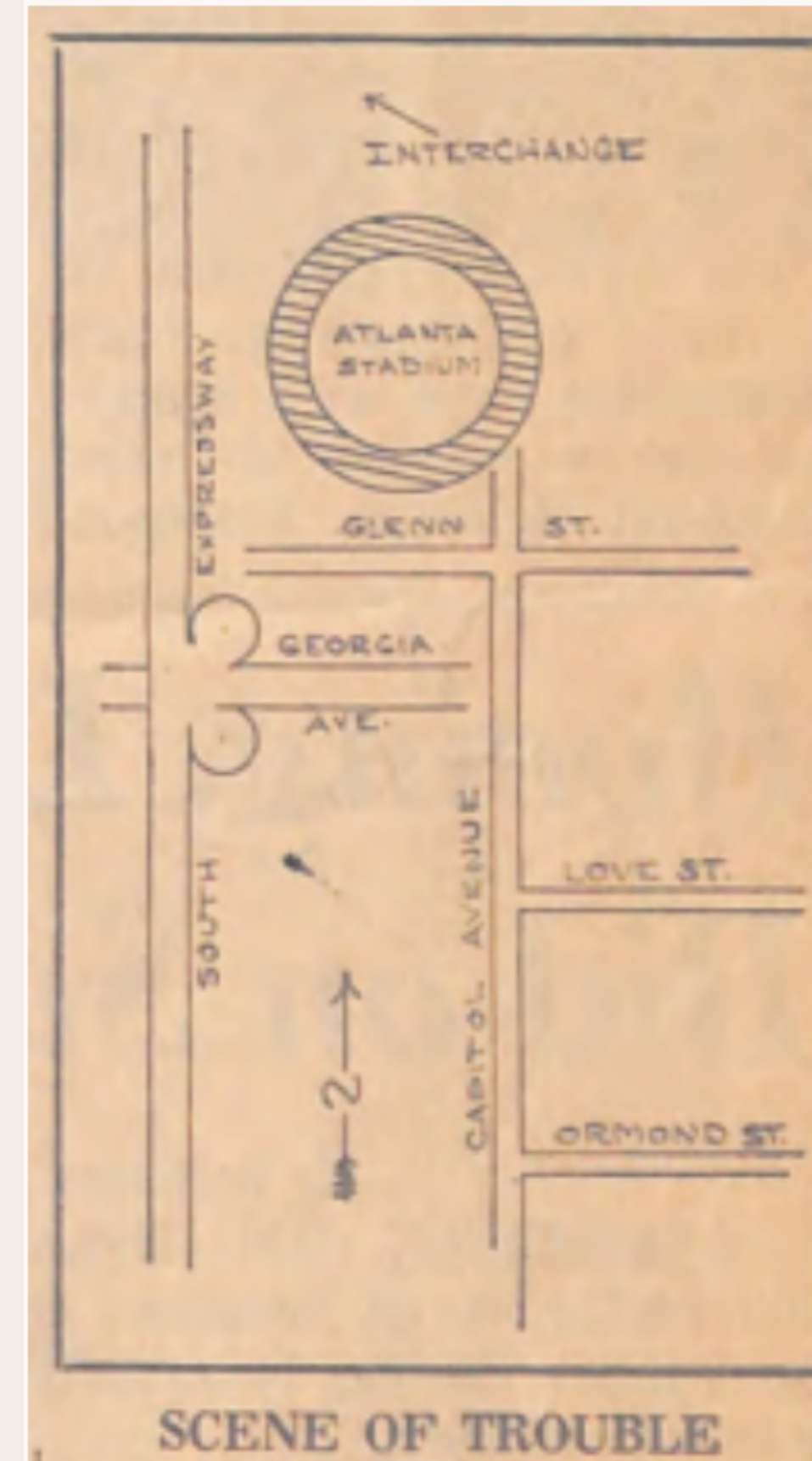
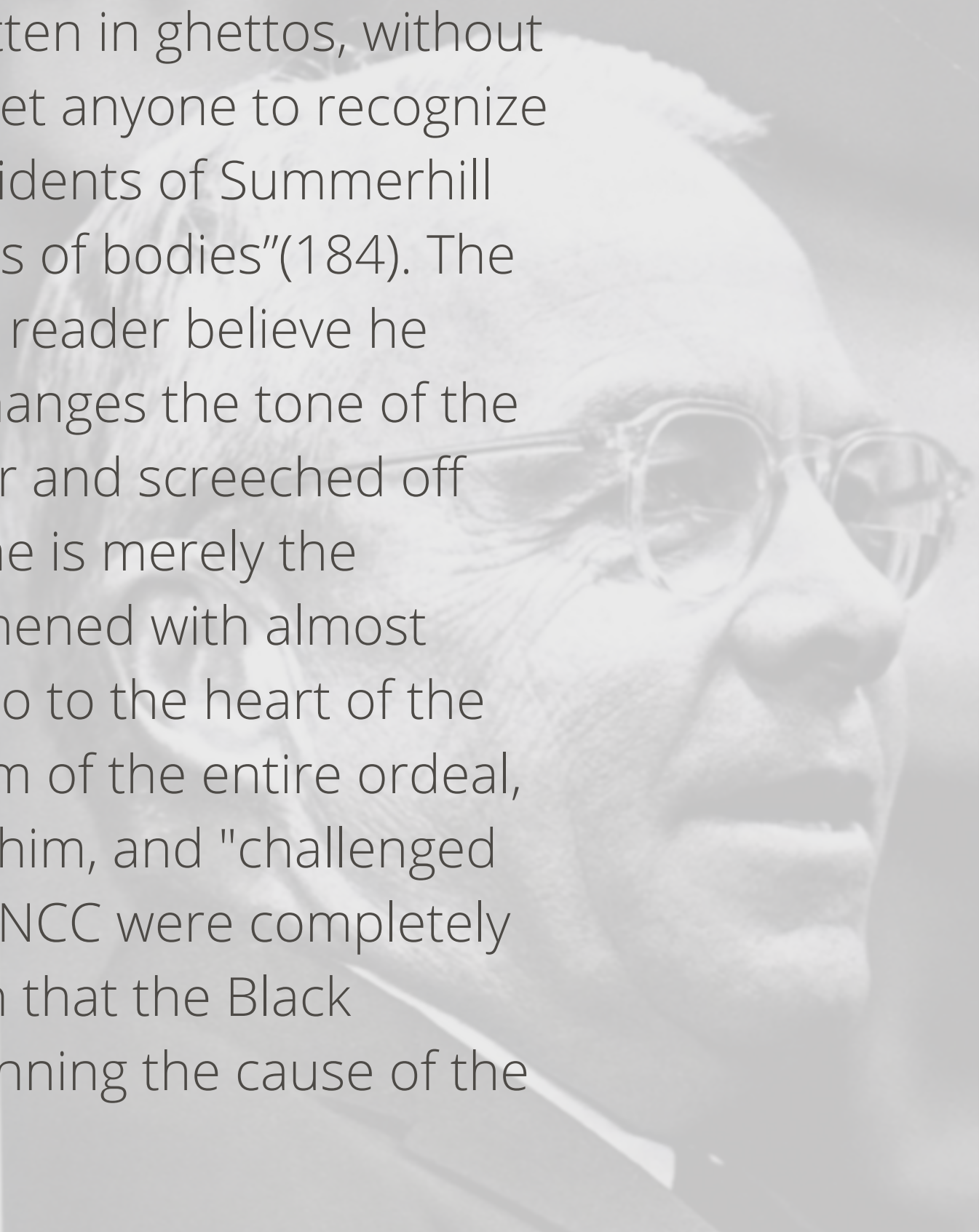


Diagram from newspaper of where the events occurred

SUMMERHILL BY ALLEN

Allen speaks on the fact that those that "had been shut off and forgotten in ghettos, without decent jobs and housing[...]were assuming the only way they would get anyone to recognize their problems was by **rioting**"(175). He completely alienated the residents of Summerhill by demonstrating that they were nothing more than a "confused mass of bodies"(184). The choice of language portrays Allen as condescending, thus making the reader believe he thinks of himself as omniscient. In his telling he uses language that changes the tone of the chapter completely using quick language like, "We jumped into the car and screeched off toward Summerhill,"(181). He claimed earlier in the chapter that "crime is merely the offspring of poverty"(178) and from his narrative, this claim is strengthened with almost every line he writes. His hubris is shown when he states "[he] would go to the heart of the **riot** and physically expose [himself]"(182). He makes himself the victim of the entire ordeal, by describing them as mindless animals and stating that they spat at him, and "challenged [him]"(186). He confidently claims it was a **riot** and the members of SNCC were completely at fault for rewing up the residents of Summerhill. He makes the pain that the Black Atlantans had been going through at that time very insignificant by pinning the cause of the **riot** on Carmichael and the shooting in the neighborhood.



Mayor Ivan Allen Jr.

■ SUMMERHILL BY SNCC

A SNCC meeting held at the headquarters in Atlanta



Summerhill exemplifies how a culmination of injustices can push a community to rebel against police brutality and poor living conditions. SNCC justified the uprising in Summerhill by arguing that it was the chance for Black residents to have a voice: “**Rebellions** happen because people know no other way in which to make themselves

heard....A **rebellion** is the language of those who must talk to the deaf.” In these terms, the **rebellion** was sparked out of necessity, not out of “chaos and “men and teen-agers looking for something to do” (184) as Allen argues. While unrest and the **rebellion** kicked off with an incident of police brutality, where a young man borrowing a car was accused of theft and unnecessarily shot by a policeman as he was trying to make it back to his mother’s house. Rather than a single event that inspires sporadic action, as Allen suggests, SNCC writes that police brutality against Black Atlantans is “something that has happened an infinite number of times before, but on one occasion, it becomes the proverbial straw breaking the camel’s back.” Discrimination by police was just one contributor to the uprising. Another was the overcrowding that resulted from Allen’s proudest accomplishment, the 18-million-dollar Atlanta Stadium. The effect was the exacerbation of the overcrowding of residents in this area, which generated poor living conditions described by Allen as “slums.” The lack of representation for the residents in the stadium discussions reconfirms that the Black residents don’t have a voice.

COMPARING THE TWO

In **Riot**, Allen repeatedly uses a medicalized metaphor to bring negative connotations to the **rioting** that was taking place across America. He sees it as a threat that these events were beginning to approach Atlanta. He states “[he] needed to come up with a contingency plan of [his] own in case the trouble spread to Atlanta.”(181). This initially compares the disruptions across the country to something of a sickness or disease. This metaphor continues to grow when he acknowledges the inevitability of a **riot** in Atlanta, by saying “we knew we were not immune”(178). Later in the chapter Allen refers to the turmoil that the community of Summerhill was undergoing as impossible to contain or fix, and states “no matter what we did it was like putting a bandaid on a cancer”(180). This is not only demeaning to the community, but also completely dehumanizes the struggles they are having and qualifies them as something seen as incurable and depressing.

The Council on Human Relations of Greater Atlanta, Inc. is a council that is “dedicated to equal opportunity for all people in the Atlanta area.” The council is put together and overseen by Mayor Allen. Following the events on September 6, a statement was released containing the council’s interpretation of the events. The purpose of the public statement was to assess the situation at Summerhill and uncover its causes and the role of those involved. The statement recognizes that the uprising was the response to a culmination of injustices, which goes directly against what Allen argues. The council also challenges Allen’s argument that SNCC was the main perpetrator of the uprising, representing them as “outside agitators.” This connection between the council and Allen reveals an opposition that wasn’t shown in Mayor, which further supports the idea that the events were more representative of a **rebellion** instead of a **riot**.

Statement issued by Council on Human Relations of Greater Atlanta, Inc.
5 Forsyth St., N.W., Atlanta, Georgia 523-1581
September 8, 1966

The Atlanta community - Negro and white - will be making a sad mistake if it writes off Tuesday's disturbances in the southside as a plot of outside agitators, to be dealt with by replenishing the police department's supply of tear gas.

Whatever the immediate causes, the incident was another in a long series of warnings, that poverty and segregation breed conditions which cannot be solved through the personal courage of the mayor or the competence of the police to handle riots, neither of which has ever been in question.

The statement released by the Council on Human Relations of Greater Atlanta, Inc.

WORD CHOICE

SNCC is intentional in differentiating the use of **rebellion** and **riot** when discussing the events that happened on September 6, saying "We use the word '**rebellion**' instead of **riot**, because it conveys a truer meaning of what has been occurring." **Rebellion** implies organization and having a political motive, with a known, common enemy. The first enemy was the policemen, the second enemy was the white store owners in the ghettos. Labeling Summerhill as a **riot** implies that it was an unorganized, violent, random, outburst, none of which is the case. By calling Summerhill a **riot**, SNCC says that it is only hurting the white people because it doesn't allow them to understand the reasons behind the demonstrations. Progress can't occur with one side refusing to understand the position of the other.

Rebellion: (noun) opposition to one in authority or dominance

Riot: (noun) a violent public disorder

Allen's description of the people in Summerhill is a prominent example of "othering" throughout the chapter. He makes the residents of Summerhill seem temperamental, and completely dismantles the idea that the **riot** could have had a deeper meaning by saying "one spark could touch off a **riot** in Summerhill"(180). While walking through the crowd he describes the people as having "a certain wild look in their eyes"(186), and completely alienates them by saying they were all migrants and not truly Atlantans. This claim also makes the people seem unwanted, even though earlier in the book Allen enjoyed boasting about the growth that Atlanta had over the years of him in office. He then goes on to implicitly describe the people of Summerhill as devilish, through calling the blue lights of the police car blessed. The police force was there to save him and his city from the people of Summerhill and Carmichael, and are seen as Godly, and the saving grace from the **riot**.

OTHERING

Throughout the chapter Allen provides the reader with a very clear divide between who is right and who is at fault in the events of Summerhill through a rhetoric that demonstrates a strong "Us vs. Them" mentality. By acknowledging the majority of Summerhill was poor, and uneducated black people, he separates the community from the rest of Atlanta. He single handedly blames the residents of Summerhill for the crime rates in Atlanta and villainizes them by saying the community now sits "in the very shadow of our new stadium"(180). This claim allows Allen to remove any blame that may have been placed on him for the status of the stadium and the land around it. He reminds the reader that Summerhill was there first, and that he is doing the residents a favor in creating something to benefit Atlanta as a whole. This is contradicted with the word "our" in the quote, a strong example of othering, because Allen is able to subtly outcast one group of people which makes the Summerhill residents seem unwanted.

While we see a trend of othering throughout Allen's Mayor, it is also present from the SNCC point of view towards white men: "Business is business. I work with white men every day and I get along. But when they start fooling around with my brothers, that's it. I don't care anymore. Long as his skin's the same as mine, he's my brother." -Atlanta Journal, Sept. 7, 1966 This duality of othering shows a stubbornness to be understanding from both sides of the conflict.



Above: SNCC's portrayal of the "white man"

Below: At the scene of the Uprising



ALLEN FAILS TO MENTION...

Court Case

After the events at Summerhill, the Atlanta Police Department put out a warrant for the arrest of Stokely Carmichael, the chairman of SNCC and several other members, for inciting a **riot**. In response, Carmichael filed a lawsuit against Allen and the Police Department for wrongly accusing him and SNCC of inciting a **riot**. Throughout the chapter "**Riot**", in Allen's *Mayor*, he places full blame on SNCC for the **riot**. However, in the court case, a key witness, Police Officer Dixon, said that he "saw Stokely Carmichael fleetingly, not more than a second, not more than a minute." The court ruled in favor of Carmichael, determining that SNCC was not to blame for inciting a **riot** at Summerhill. Allen is purposeful in leaving this out of *Mayor* as it completely invalidates his narrative that the radical SNCC members are his only obstacle with regards to "the race issue."

Stokely CARMICHAEL et al., Plaintiffs,
v.
Ivan ALLEN, Jr., Mayor of City of Atlanta, Georgia et al., Defendants.

Civ. A. No. 10421.

United States District Court N. D. Georgia, Atlanta Division.

The title of the case on the case transcript

Atlanta Race Riot of 1906

Throughout the chapter, Allen boasts that "there had never been a **riot** in Atlanta"(181). However, the Atlanta Race riot, which took place September 22-24, 1906, created such turmoil that it is still today the most significant riot that has taken place in Atlanta. The significance and pain that this riot brought to the city of Atlanta was undeniably unforgotten, and there is no way that Ivan Allen did not know about it. This riot involved the death of hundreds of Black Atlantans at the hands of white Atlantans. Because of this, it is possible that Allen did not see this as a riot because the main aggressors were white. It can be assumed that from Allen's claims in the book, he does not see the white race as agitators or as a group capable of rioting or being at fault for the deaths of black people, which gives evidence that his claim that there had never been a riot was intentional.



Portrait of the 1906
Atlanta Race Riot

THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE AND CLASS

Intersectionality describes how different characteristics of one's identity create an overlapping of discrimination. This concept is present in *Mayor* when Allen discriminates against both race and class. The intersectionality of discrimination serves as one of the main ideological reasons for why Allen was ignorant toward the grievances of the residents of Summerhill. Over and over in *Mayor*, Allen drills into the audience that he was not a racist. We see this through his relationship with Martin Luther King Jr., his participation in the public accommodations bill in D.C., and his hatred for radical right racists like Lester Maddox. Therefore, it can not be said that the discrimination shown in his retelling of Summerhill is based solely on race. It is also based on the fact that residents of Summerhill and members of SNCC were lower-class Atlantans. Allen doesn't know how to communicate with those of a different economic class; their language is eligible to him. When he goes to Summerhill, he compares the appearances of the residents to himself, saying, "I could see a certain wild look in their eyes, the look of somebody who has quit caring. And I could not find a single familiar face....Here was a gray-haired middle-aged man who was walking unarmed onto their 'turf,' somebody in a good suit and good shoes who represented The Man to them" (186) In this description, Allen uses a specific type of othering that relies on the economic difference between himself and the residents. Describing his nice attire and labelling himself as "The Man" makes it appear that he is asserting his superiority over them, based on both his white skin color, and his "good suit and good shoes."

Although it is clear that Allen couldn't truly understand what the residents of Summerhill were going through, he believed that he did, which is seen through his "two specific moves in advance of any **riot** that might occur". The use of the word 'any' in this section of the text is ironic considering the choices he made mainly focus on black people, and settling them down. There really is nothing put in place if the **rioters** were white. By creating a list of only black ministers, he removes the claim that he was prepared for any **riot** that happened in Atlanta. It is also purposeful for Allen to rely on black ministers to be on his side during the event of a **riot**, because they belong to a higher class group, and therefore their communication methods are legible to him. When writing the book it can be inferred that Allen intentionally noted that the agreement between him and the ministers was a verbal agreement, so that when in the future of the book the man that begins to bad mouth him on top of the car is not so bad because they were not legally binded to anything.

■ BLACK POWER FRIGHT

Allen maintains his disdain for SNCC during his time in office, saying that Stokely Carmichael and it's members are too "radical" and impeding his progress with "the race issue." However, Allen also appears to be intimidated by the growing Black Power Movement. Allen interprets the **rebellion** and the Black Power Movement similarly saying that both are violent and disruptive, which is reinforced when SNCC writes: "To many, including Mayor Ivan Allen and Mr. Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution, it is possible for someone to enter an area with a soundtruck, shout 'Black Power!' several times and people will knock each other over getting out to the streets with bricks and bottles in their hands." According to this description, the words Black Power seem to have the power to set off a violent revolt. This is just another example of Allen delegitimizing the civil rights movement and making it seem violent and radical. Another example of white officials being intimidated by Carmichael's slogan was when he visited the houses of Black Atlantans and asked to put a "Black Power" sign in their yard. The Atlanta Police Department responded by following him with police photographers. The defensiveness of their response reinforces the intimidation that white authority figures felt in regards to the two words, Black Power.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL
JAILED IN ATLANTA, GA.!

WHITE RACISTS ARE TRYING TO FRAME SNCC AGAIN

Newspaper headline following
Carmichael's arrest



MODERATE MAYOR ALLEN



Allen Jr. and his wife with Martin Luther King Jr.
at his honorary dinner

Ivan Allen Jr. and Lester
Maddox

Allen's position in the political spectrum is very confusing, and ironic. He self proclaims two worst enemies throughout the book: Lester Maddox and Stokely Carmichael. The irony in this creation is the position of these two men on the political spectrum, since they sit on the complete extremes of both sides. This leaves Allen somewhere in the middle, though he claims to be a liberal at heart. By naming the chapter "**Riot**", Allen is able to make the events at Summerhill seem very significant. In turn, he talks badly about Stokely Carmichael and SNCC which not only gives the organization a bad name, but villainizes Carmichael and makes his group seem insignificant by making SNCC seem like a group of outsiders, radicals, and agitators. This irony of his stance also provides important feedback from both his supporters and enemies. Since he sits in the middle of the political spectrum, the radical racists of the times found it necessary to acknowledge his "noble" actions.

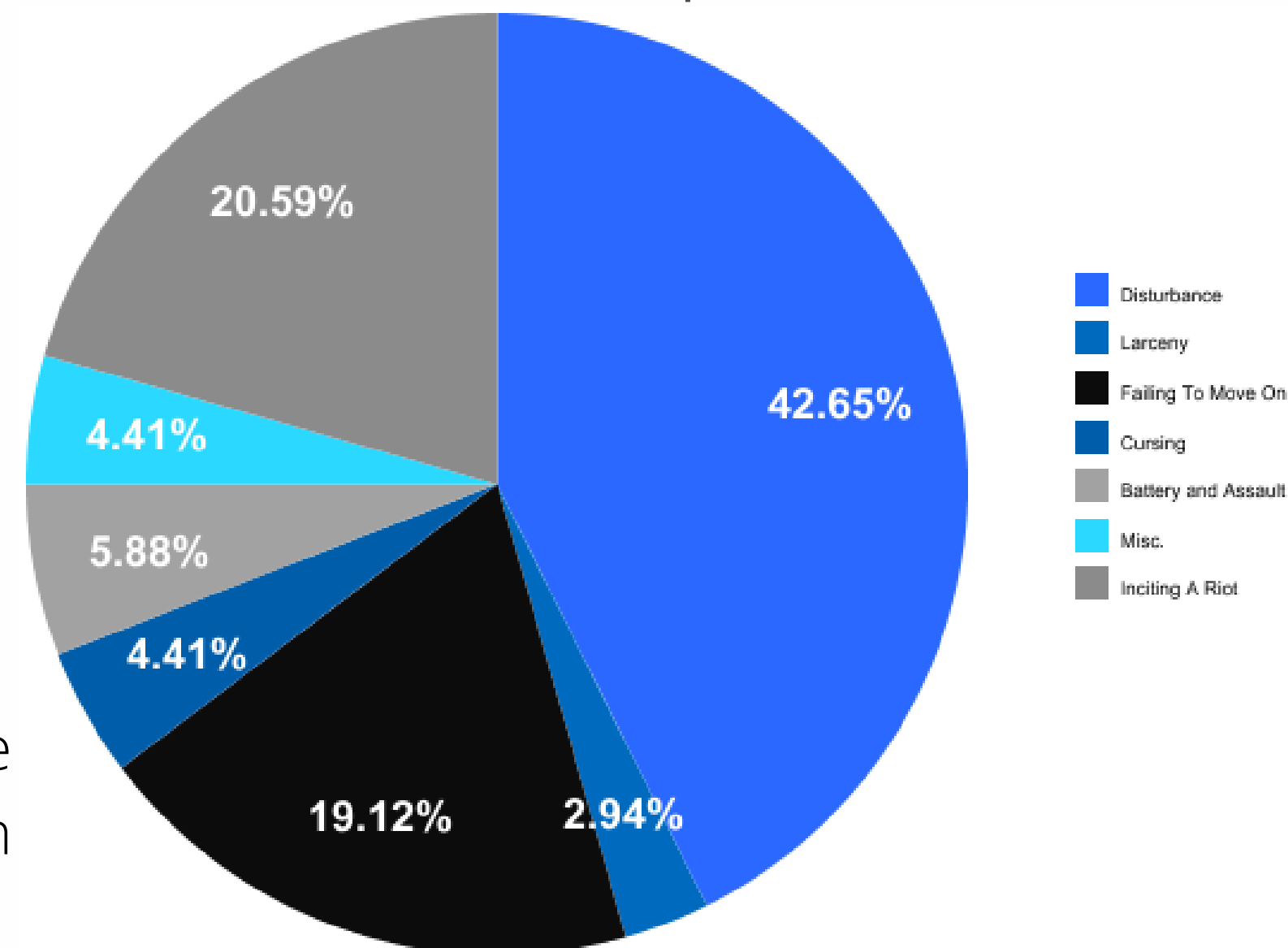
THE TRUTH IS IN THE NUMBERS

The data presented here is a record of the arrests taken the day after the events at Summerhill. It is important to note that the largest percentage of the arrests were charged as “disturbances”. This vague term gave the police officers of Atlanta the freedom to charge almost anything as a disturbance. In Allen’s narration of the events at Summerhill, he makes it seem like the entire ordeal was over after the tear gas was thrown into the crowd, but shown here are the recorded arrests 24 hours after Summerhill. It seems as though Allen left out this extension of the timeline purposefully, in order to seem like the hero in a time of need. The data also presents an interesting claim about the nature of the events at Summerhill. Throughout “**Riot**” Allen describes the

events as violent, chaotic, and labels them as a **riot**. However, according to the data, only about 25% of the arrests were done on charges related to violence or inciting a **riot**. If the events at Summerhill were undoubtedly violent and **riot-like**, why does such a small percentage of the arrests have to do with this? The much larger percentage of arrests points to the answer.

Disturbance, larceny, failure to move on, cursing, and miscellaneous make up 75% of the arrests at Summerhill. All of these charges are erratic, and rely on subjectivity. It can therefore be inferred that the Atlanta Police Officers arrested individuals on the basis of asserting authority in an excessive manner.

Total arrests on September 7, 1966



THE IMPACT OF THE STADIUM

The construction of the Atlanta Stadium is hailed as one of Allen's greatest achievements as mayor, but was also one of the most disastrous events to happen to the Black Atlantan community. The 18-million-dollar stadium was constructed on the edge of Summerhill and Mechanicsville, an area that had just been cleared for highway construction, future infrastructure, and other urban renewal projects. They weren't offered a new place to live, and were forced to settle into the already small amount of land that was left.

The resulting overcrowding in these neighborhoods greatly affected the living conditions, and was described by Allen and SNCC as slums, "Black slums are never anything to brag about... shacks, rats, roaches, garbage that spills out of the cans and into the streets because the Sanitation Department seems to collect more on a whim than on a schedule." SNCC reasons that these conditions greatly contributed to the internal tension in Summerhill, and that "No matter how many times the city of Atlanta and the press scream that SNCC was responsible for the **rebellion**, the black people of Atlanta know that SNCC did not destroy homes for hotels, motels, expressways, and a ball stadium." Their argument here directly refutes the claim Allen makes that SNCC is to blame for "disturbances."

Snippet from the Braves scorebook
presenting the stadium

**Welcome to the world's first
all-electric stadium**

Welcome, Braves! We hope you're enjoying your splendid new home. The handsome Atlanta stadium scores high in comfort, convenience and efficiency. And welcome, sports fans. Everything here is new, modern and all-electric, designed to increase your pleasure. A perfect setting to "play ball."

GEORGIA POWER COMPANY

TAKEAWAYS

A comparison of interpretations of what happened at Summerhill reveals Mayor Allen to be a master class story manipulator. Allen's construction of the chapter, "**Riot**," in Mayor contains a combination of condescending, racist, and hero complex rhetoric, engineered to control his public image. His inability to understand how his own urban renewal decisions have impacted black residents is due to his discrimination against both race and class, as well as his ineptitude to admit wrong-doing. After research, it is still difficult to find an objective retelling of the events at Summerhill. This makes it impossible to completely refute Allen's claim that SNCC is to blame. However, evidence from police reports and the statement from a special committee proves that these claims may have been shadowed by his pre existing opposition to SNCC.

It is important to note that the Ivan Allen Digital Archive is home to some of the only primary source documents from the events at Summerhill. These documents give great value to further research into analyzing different first-hand interpretations and responses to the events.



Top photo: Mayor Allen Campaigning
Bottom photo: SNCC's Logo

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