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How Rodney King's five words changed the face of Los Angeles

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NCR Today

His videotaped beating sparked three days of riots that defined Los Angeles 20 years ago, but Rodney King -- who was found dead in the swimming pool at his home Sunday -- became an odd and unexpected symbol for much more.

Back in 1992, four Los Angeles police officers were acquitted of the beating, despite graphic videotape shot by a neighbor from out his front window. The riots that followed were a key moment in something I had never experienced before: the nervous breakdown of society. In the early '90s, California went through it all: a massive earthquake, raging wildfires that ripped through Malibu, floods that pushed hillside homes down mountains, and riots that traumatized America's second-largest city.

Through it all, there was an astounding lack of leadership to help the city and state pull together. During the riots, it took Pete Wilson, the governor at the time, days to call in the National Guard. For 72 hours, outnumbered police and firefighters dodged bullets, and shopkeepers kept loaded machine guns at their sides. With the quakes, fires and floods, government and civic leaders seemed overwhelmed -- and there was much talk about the end of the California dream.

There was really only one voice of sanity that people here recall from that era: Rodney King himself. He was no sweetheart, no hero. A young man who had his run-ins with the law before, King was the kind of guy prosecutors could paint as not-really-blameless in his own beating, and large portions of the population accepted that.

But in the middle of the nervous social breakdown, with bullets flying and arson fires spreading, it was King who stepped in front of a phalanx of microphones to simply say: "Can't we all get along?"

In the years that followed, King struggled to pull his life together. He battled alcoholism and other demons -- winding up, all too obviously, as a cast member recently on a cable reality show called "Celebrity Rehab."

If he has a legacy, part of it is the way the LAPD was forced to clean up its act after the beating and riots. But a greater part of what he left behind will be those five straightforward words. They ring true today, too, as a nation dealing with tough times seems to have run out of civil responses. Opposing camps glare at one another, and the leadership to push things forward despite the desperation seems very lacking.

Can't we all get along means more today than ever.

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