

# Fighting over the dream

*The riots in L.A. left Koreans and blacks further apart than ever*

**T**he Korean-American shopkeeper who wields a rifle to ward off attackers—one of the indelible images of the Los Angeles riots—is a hyphenated hybrid: a Korean who has adapted defensively to America's mean streets. In South Korea, using violence to protect homes or businesses is very rare and guns are virtually unobtainable. But



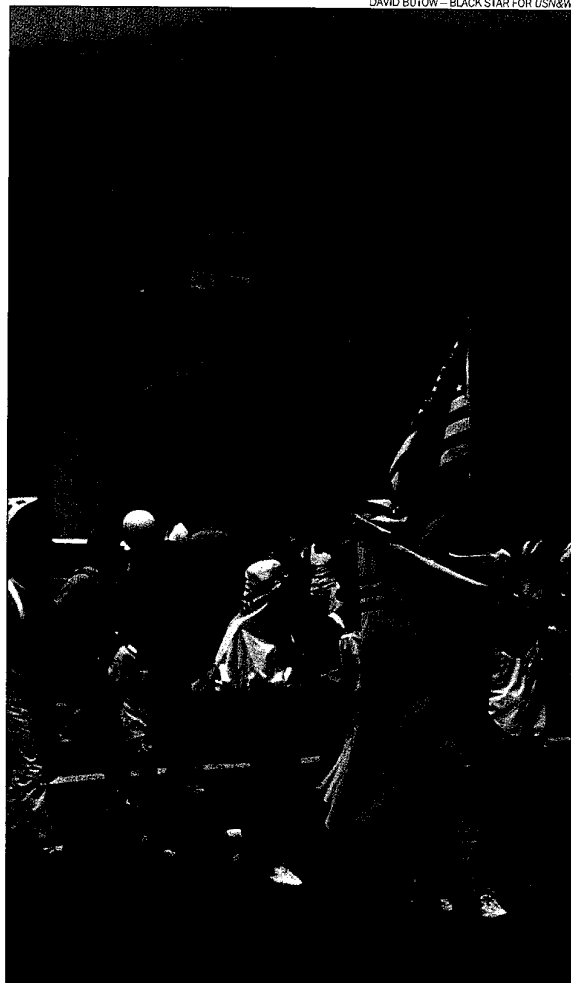
**CRISIS IN THE CITIES**

every able-bodied man learns about weapons and brutality in a compulsory basic-training course that makes Marine Corps boot camp look like Sunday school. Koreans are also seen to be more assertive and uncom-

promising than other Asians. So when they confront a new set of pressures and dangers in the United States, they have the skills and perhaps the instincts to respond in a violent American way.

If Koreans seem to have burst suddenly onto the American scene, they have. Thirty years ago, before national immigration quotas were lifted, there were 10,000 Koreans in the United States. Today there are 800,000, one third of them in California. Many came with what Harvard University Korea expert Carter Eckert calls "an understandable post-colonial mentality: a view of themselves as an embattled people who won't be pushed around." They also brought attitudes common to homogeneous East Asian societies—a wariness of other peoples and a particular fear of blacks.

Like Jewish and Italian immigrants before them, Koreans have gravitated to retailing in urban areas, where their willingness to work long hours and use low-paid family labor compensates for their limited English and capital. But Koreans are different from their predecessors



**Protest.** Koreans march in central L.A. after the riots.

and from many other recent immigrants in that they are mostly well educated and relatively well-off. Some 75 percent of Korean entrepreneurs have college degrees; many of them sold their homes in Korea to invest in their American ventures. For them, running a store is both a first step on the American ladder and, often, a downward slide from higher-status professional jobs back home.

**Paying the price.** Inner-city retailing, for all its risks, can be profitable. California State University sociologist Eui-Young Yu found in a 1990 survey in Los Angeles that Korean firms that sold to blacks and Hispanics earned more than those catering to other Koreans or whites. Still, the price has been high: In L.A. alone, 12 Korean merchants were killed by thieves in the past 18 months. Another Korean was killed and about 1,600 Korean stores were burned or ransacked in the L.A. riots. Some stricken shop owners say they will now return to Korea, as some 7,000 Korean-Americans did last year. Racial con-

flict is a major reason.

Black resentments and Korean fears are all too real. Blacks read Koreans' cultural signals or fractured English as rudeness. They also complain that Koreans take money out of the community and hire few non-Koreans. Both are true. Koreans move to be near good schools, just like other middle-class Americans. In L.A.'s Koreatown, Koreans own 40 percent of the property but constitute only 10 percent of the residents. Blacks are right, too, that Koreans find it easier to borrow money, because they have more collateral and community support available.

Ethnic ties are strong among Koreans: Yu's L.A. survey found that a majority buy their homes, cars and insurance through Korean agencies and patronize Korean doctors, lawyers and plumbers. Southern California has at least 500 Korean churches to serve the 75 percent of Koreans who are Christian. Koreans also maintain closer ties to home

than most other immigrant groups. A Korean presidential candidate, the Korean ambassador to the United States and a Foreign Ministry team all got to riot-wrecked Koreatown days before Bill Clinton and George Bush.

Despite their considerable progress, the Korean economic experience in the United States is not all good news. Although they have a higher rate of entrepreneurship than any other Americans—nearly 40 percent of Korean families own a business—Korean-Americans' average incomes are still lower than those of whites and some other Asian-Americans. And Koreans earn less than other people with equivalent education, which is why they are so determined to protect their hard-won gains and to ensure that their children do better still. Koreans, like other Asians, resent the term "model minority." Call them old-fashioned seekers of an old-fashioned dream. ■

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