

When rioting erupted in Los Angeles right after the Rodney King verdict in April, Arthur A. Fletcher wasn't surprised. Fletcher says he and the agency he heads, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, had seen it coming.

"We sent a letter to every governor in the country [a year ago]," Fletcher recalls. "To the president and to Democrat and Republican leaders in the House and Senate."

As he paraphrases it, the letter stated: "They, we're headed toward a racial catastrophe," he says. "It could happen in the political year 1992 unless you political leaders call a summit right now. And look at this mess that's in place—it's a tinderbox—before somebody lights a match and sets it off."

Unhappily, Fletcher recalls in a Bulletin interview, no one took him up on his suggestion. The response—or lack of one—goes a long way toward explaining the Los Angeles eruption, he says. The summit, he adds, would have provided an opportunity to address the issues he believes fueled the riot—"massive unemployment, poor education, ill housing, excessive crime."

Needless to say, Fletcher's interpretation of the riot differs markedly from that of the White House—putting the sharp-tongued, 67-year-old leader in the kind of "hot seat" he's grown accustomed to over the years.

As a veteran civil rights activist and a longtime moderate Republican, Fletcher is used to being odd man out.

He has been especially controversial since 1990, when President Bush, an old political ally, appointed him to head and, presumably, revive the agency.

Formed in 1957 to monitor federal civil rights laws, the agency in the 1960s and 1970s was in the forefront of fashioning the nation's civil rights agenda. But in the 1980s the agency declined under President Reagan.

Fletcher's credentials seemed impeccable. He had been assistant secretary of labor for President Nixon and deputy assistant for urban affairs for President Ford. And as a black leader, he had experienced bias first hand.

But he got off to a slow start. He had already infuriated his party's right wing when he called President Reagan "the worst president for civil rights in this century." The split deepened when he opposed President Bush's veto of the 1990 Civil Rights Act.

A year later, however, he praised Bush for signing the Civil Rights Act of 1991.

Fletcher's differences with the administration widened after the Los Angeles explosion, when White House press secretary Martin Fitzwater said the riots were a result of the social welfare programs that Congress enacted in the



Fletcher's message to the White House: Bush has to do something heroic.

## Man of 'rage'

*Arthur Fletcher sees L.A. riot as symptom of nation's racial ills*

1960s and 1970s.

The contention nettles Fletcher, who helped shape "affirmative action" policies in the 1970s to integrate large sectors of the construction industry.

Because of this effort, Fletcher says, there are more blacks in construction unions and on construction jobs today than in the past. "Affirmative action is my footnote in history," he says. "It has worked."

So, was the riot really caused by the failure of 1960s and 70s programs?

Not at all, says Fletcher. "[The eruption] is a symptom of America's refusal to embrace black Americans in the economy of the country," he says. "[It didn't start with the Great Society.]"

Shortly after calm returned to Los Angeles, just before visiting the riot scene, Fletcher talked to a reporter for an hour on what he believes caused the riot and, additionally, what Pres-

ident Bush should do about it.

According to Fletcher, the Los Angeles riot is traceable to efforts by certain elements in America to stymie black economic progress. These elements, he says, are working to undercut laws enacted in the 1960s and 70s to provide housing, job, public accommodation and business opportunity rights.

"As these laws began to work, these small elements came forth with a counterattack," Fletcher says. "And the counterattack was to call every piece of legislation we put on the books a request for special treatment."

With such arguments, these elements have "almost stopped" the federal and state governments from carrying out the intent of this legislation, Fletcher says. "And so what you've got [in Los Angeles] is the consequence of this counterattack," he adds.

So far Fletcher has been guarded in

his appraisal of Bush's response to the riot. He supports the president's call for legislation to give tax breaks for center-city businesses and allow public housing tenants to buy their homes.

But Fletcher also is the first to admit that Bush must do a whole lot more: "Bush has to do something heroic."

What Bush should do, he explains, is go into the well of the House of Representatives, at a joint session of Congress, and address the nation. "What's needed is a vision of an America that works," Fletcher says. "With all of its vital organs ticking and all of its citizens participating."

Among actions he would have Bush take, Fletcher proposes the equivalent of a GI Bill of Rights for those who would go college if they could afford it, regardless of race.

Fletcher knows all about the GI Bill. After serving in World War II, he attended Washburn University in Topeka on the GI Bill. But he quickly learned that companies weren't ready to hire a black man with a college degree.

After working for a time as a teacher in rural Kansas, he took his family to California in 1960 where he had lined up a job. But he was fired when his boss learned he had helped organize a lawsuit in Kansas, Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education—the landmark suit that made racial segregation unlawful in America's public schools.

Then tragedy struck. "My wife committed suicide because I couldn't find a job," Fletcher says. "She jumped from the Bay Bridge, after telling me, 'You have been blackballed from the employment arena altogether.'"

Fletcher adds, "And I have been under controlled rage ever since."

Fletcher says the tragedy strengthened his resolve to push for change.

Despite the worsening political climate, Fletcher insists he's optimistic. He says Bush will do the right thing. "Bush isn't the problem," he says. "Bush's problem is the right wing. It's been snapping at him all the time and saying, 'If you dare reach out and embrace the minorities, we'll see to it you don't get reelected.'"

Right wing or no right wing, Fletcher says he believes Bush will go into the well of the House of Representatives and address the nation. "The president will [unveil] a nonpartisan effort to get this problem solved," he says.

In fact, he adds, "I'm prepared to wager that it will be done between now and the time of the Republican convention. I expect him to do it."

As for himself, Fletcher says he will continue to push for the changes he believes are needed, even if it means offending some of the people in the White House. "I don't care what [Bush's] advisers are telling him," Fletcher says. "I will not back away."