

2019-2020

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Charles Abraham

James Madison University

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Recommended Chicago Notes and Bibliography Citation

Abraham, Charles. "MOVE: Philadelphia's Forgotten Bombing." *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal* 7, no. 1 (2020): 27-36. <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/jmurj/vol7/iss1/3>.

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MOVE: Philadelphia's Forgotten Bombing



Charles Abraham

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On May 13, 1985, the city of Philadelphia erupted into flames. Under the orders of Mayor Wilson Goode, the Philadelphia Police Department dropped a bomb onto the row house containing MOVE, a cult-like organization, on Osage Avenue in West Philadelphia. The resulting fire killed eleven people, including five children, and burned down sixty-one houses. By examining newspaper articles on MOVE, the bombing by the Philadelphia Police, and the public's response, this paper investigates how Mayor Goode was able to continue his political career and how this bombing has faded into obscurity outside of the city. The media's attitude and reporting on MOVE, the city's lack of connection with MOVE's beliefs, and the efforts of the city government to move on from the bombing have caused this tragedy to become largely forgotten.

In a fortified row house in West Philadelphia, a bomb dropped by Philadelphia Police killed eleven MOVE members, including five children, and burned down sixty-one her houses after a lengthy standoff between the two groups. MOVE is a cult-like organization which eschewed technology, medicine and western clothing, where members lived communally, ate raw food, left garbage on their yards, and proselytized with a loudspeaker, frustrating the residents of Osage Avenue. The MOVE bombing, remembered as “May 13, 1985” in West Philadelphia, was the first time a U.S. city bombed itself, and it could have been a pivotal moment in the mayoral reign of Wilson Goode and for the city of brotherly love. Instead, the bombing has faded into obscurity, with only minimal consequences for the city government and for the city. Public antipathy and the efforts of the city government to move on from the bombing, revealed and even enabled by media reporting, have caused this tragedy to become largely forgotten.¹

MOVE: The Organization

Vincent Leaphart founded the American Christian Movement for Life, later shortened to MOVE, in 1972 in West Philadelphia and changed his name to John Africa. MOVE was primarily a black organization, although white people could join as well. As an anti-establishment and anti-technology group, its members ate a diet of only raw fruits, vege-

1 For further reading on cults in America, see Willa Appel, *Cults in America: Programmed for Paradise* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983), which discusses the phenomenon of cults and how one is indoctrinated or breaks out of a cult. For further reading on African Americans in mid-20th century America see Dorothy K. Newman et al., *Protest, Politics and Prosperity: Black Americans and White Institutions, 1940-1975* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) or Annette Gordon-Reed, ed., *Race on Trial: Law and Justice in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), which discuss how African Americans were treated by the police and in the court as well as other white-dominated institutions during this period. For more on MOVE, see J.M. Floyd-Thomas, “The Burning of Rebellious Thoughts: MOVE as Revolutionary Black Humanism,” *The Black Scholar* 32, no.1 (Spring 2002): 11-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41068961>, which argues MOVE was a radical and religious group that exemplified revolutionary black humanist thinking. For more on the effect of the media on the perception of MOVE, see Kimberly Sanders and Judson Jeffries, “Framing MOVE: A Press’ Complicity in the Murder of Women and Children in the City of (Un) Brotherly Love,” *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 4 (December 2013): 566-586, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-013-9252-7>, which discusses how press coverage led to antipathy towards the MOVE organization. For more on the MOVE bombing and its aftermath, see Robin Wagner-Pacifi, *Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia versus MOVE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Hizkias Assefa, *Extremist Groups and Conflict Resolution: The MOVE Crisis in Philadelphia* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Margot Harry, “Attention MOVE—This is America!” *Sage Journals* 28, no. 4 (April 1987): 5-28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639688702800402>; Georgia A. Persons, “The Philadelphia MOVE Incident as an Anomaly in Models of Mayoral Leadership,” *Phylon* 48, no. 4 (December 1987): 249-260, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274482>; or John Anderson and Hilary Hevenor, *Burning Down the House: MOVE and the Tragedy of Philadelphia* (New York: Norton, 1987), which all discuss the bombing and how it affected Philadelphia and the city government. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported on MOVE and the bombing from 1985-1987. Temple University Library Special Collections houses the records of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission regarding the MOVE bombing and its antecedents.

tables, nuts, and eggs; used no medicine or western clothing; disposed of their garbage in the yard; and used outhouses instead of conventional toilets. The children of MOVE were not allowed to attend school and had never eaten cooked food or watched television. These were the first “pure” members of MOVE: they were raised to never be exposed to the corrupting influences of social and political institutions. Members protested outside of zoos and pet stores, which often led to arrests though the police did not believe MOVE was even potentially violent during the early 1970s.²

The MOVE bombing, remembered as “May 13, 1985” in West Philadelphia, was the first time a U.S. city bombed itself.

The other residents of Powelton Village did not hold a great opinion of MOVE, which lived communally in three townhouses in the neighborhood. Powelton Village, located near Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania, was a diverse and tolerant community and a haven for political activists. In 1976, neighbors began complaining about children playing in the yard without diapers and in unsanitary conditions. The complaints of Powelton residents’ and MOVE’s campaign against police brutality caused the Philadelphia Police Department to set up 24-hour surveillance on the MOVE townhouses, fueling their belief that they were being targeted by the police. The next year, MOVE members began to sit out on the porch holding rifles, wearing berets, and using loudspeakers to lecture their neighbors. MOVE already held a reputation as a radical black organization, much like the Black Panthers, because of MOVE’s emergence during the “Black Power” era. Many people in Philadelphia believed the public display of weapons to be the start of the organization becoming more militant.³

Tensions between the city and MOVE began to rise as neighbors in Powelton continued complaining about MOVE’s actions and as the police department’s surveillance began to infuriate the organization. Between 1977 and 1978, MOVE placed bomb-timing devices, though no explosives, in several hotels across the nation as well as in

2 Wagner-Pacifi, *Discourse and Destruction*, 27-29; Sanders and Jeffries, “Framing MOVE,” 568; Floyd-Thomas, “The Burning of Rebellious Thoughts,” 13; Jack N. Nagel, “Psychological Obstacles to Administrative Responsibility: Lessons of the MOVE Disaster,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3325510>; Assefa, *Extremist Groups*, 14-15.

3 Wagner-Pacifi, *Discourse and Destruction*, 29-31; Nagel, “Psychological Obstacles,” 3-4; Floyd-Thomas, “The Burning of Rebellious Thoughts,” 11-21.

London.⁴ These devices were left with threatening letters stating that MOVE would strike for real unless Philadelphia stopped its harassment. The organization had begun a feud with then-Mayor Frank Rizzo, who had previously served as Philadelphia's Police Commissioner and run for mayor on a law-and-order campaign. MOVE's residency in Powelton Village came to a head in 1978 after an agreement between the organization and the city made on May 5 disintegrated. The city and MOVE had agreed that the city would end the blockade and within 90 days MOVE members would relocate to a residence outside the city. MOVE saw the city as the center of the societal corruption they sought to end and stayed past the 90-day limit. While several organizations active in Powelton Village at the time were either pro-MOVE or supported negotiation with MOVE to allow them to stay in the neighborhood, MOVE and the police engaged in a protracted firefight resulting in the death of one policeman, Officer James Ramp, and the sentencing of nine MOVE members to jail for the officer's death.⁵

The policy of non-confrontation and avoidance proved ineffective, and in 1984 the Philadelphia Police began to plan a course of action against MOVE.

After being forced out of Powelton Village, MOVE took up residence in a row house on Osage Avenue in Cobbs Creek, West Philadelphia. At first, the organization and the residents of Osage Avenue coexisted peacefully. In time, however, tensions began to as lifestyle differences emerged and the neighbors began complaining. MOVE removed the flea collars off of their neighbors' pets, collected and fed wild animals, built pigeon coops, and left their refuse outside in their yard. Most distressing to Osage Avenue residents was that the MOVE children appeared to be malnourished and rummaged through their trash looking for food. The neighbors were told Wilson Goode would help them after he had become mayor, but in late 1983 after the mayoral election, MOVE began to use bullhorns and loudspeakers to harass their neighbors.⁶

4 While MOVE left these letters and devices across the nation and internationally, they were still only an organization local to Philadelphia and were not expanding nationally.

5 Wagner-Pacifi, *Discourse and Destruction*, 30-32; Nagel, "Psychological Obstacles," 16; Assefa, *Extremist Groups*, 20-37. Nine members of MOVE were convicted in the shooting of Officer James Ramp during the 1978 shootout with the police and were sentenced with thirty to one hundred years in prison. These members are known collectively as "The MOVE 9."

6 Assefa, *Extremist Groups*, 102-108; Nagel, "Psychological Obstacles" 5.

MOVE believed Mayor Goode had the ability to release the jailed MOVE 9 members, and they knew if they began to harass residents of Osage Avenue—a middle-class neighborhood and the bedrock of Goode's political support—the city would have to pay attention to them. Despite MOVE holding the block hostage, Goode used apolicy of "appeasement, non-confrontation and avoidance," attempting to avoid conflict in any way possible.⁷ City Operating Departments—Health, Water, Human Services, Streets, and Licences and Inspections—were barred by city policy from carrying out their responsibilities at the MOVE row house. City officials believed that once MOVE members realized the city was ignoring them, they would either change their belligerent behavior or leave the city. The policy of non-confrontation and avoidance proved ineffective, and in 1984 the Philadelphia Police began to plan a course of action against MOVE, one of the first signs of what was to come.⁸

May 13, 1985

Mayor Goode told the police he needed a plan of action against MOVE in the spring of 1985. He wanted to explore the possibilities of arresting some MOVE members and obtaining a court order to hold the children. MOVE began fortifying their row house in earnest in the fall of 1984 and the winter of 1985, building a bunker made of railroad ties, logs, and steel plates on the top of their house; they used similar material to fortify the walls. In April 1985, they announced with bullhorns their intentions to kill the mayor or any police officer who approached the fortified house. Neighbors threatened to take matters into their own hands after claiming to have seen men with rifles on the roof and in the bunker of the house. On the morning of May 13, 1985, the police attempted to serve warrants for the arrests of four MOVE members. These warrants were for misdemeanor charges and primarily intended to get them out of the neighborhood. Mayor Goode required that any officers involved in the 1978 shooting not be involved in the operation on Osage Avenue, but several of those officers were present in the assault force. At 5:30 a.m. outside the MOVE row house, police used a bullhorn to announce the names of the members to be arrested for illegal possession of explosives and terroristic threats and gave the members fifteen minutes to surrender. MOVE refused. Police insertion teams then entered the houses on either side. In response, MOVE shot at the police force from inside. Over the next hour and a half, the Philadelphia police fired over 10,000

7 "Excerpts from Commission's Report on Bombing," New York Times, March 7, 1986.

8 Wagner-Pacifi, *Discourse and Destruction*, 32, 82-85; Nagel, "Psychological Obstacles," 7; Assefa, *Extremist Groups*, 110-111; Persons, "The Philadelphia MOVE Incident," 255.

rounds of ammunition on the row house and used explosives to blow holes in the walls. By 10:40 a.m., the front of the house was destroyed, but the fortifications MOVE installed in the winter had held, preventing the police from seizing the house. When it became clear their tactics had failed, Mayor Goode announced during a televised press conference he would take the house by any means necessary.⁹

After the press conference, the police sought another way to force the eleven people out of the house that included the use of explosives. They began assembling an explosive entry device around 4:30 p.m., and around thirty minutes later, Mayor Goode approved the use of the entry device. At 5:27 p.m., the police dropped an explosive package from a helicopter onto the bunker of the house. When the bomb exploded, it did not remove the bunker; rather, it ignited a gasoline tank. Instead of trying to contain the resulting blaze, the police and fire commissioners let the bunker burn. It was not until 6:32 p.m. that the fire department turned on its hoses, and it was not until 9:30 p.m. that they took more active steps to contain the fire. The fire raged on until 11:41 p.m., engulfing 61 homes, damaging 110 additional houses, killing John Africa and the ten other occupants of the MOVE house, five of them children, and leaving 250 men, women, and children homeless.¹⁰

Response to the MOVE Bombing

The bombing of the MOVE row house should have been a pivotal event in the history of Philadelphia, showing the incompetence of city officials in an explosive finale. Yet, after the bombing, Mayor Goode and the Philadelphia Police Department received support from around the country. The Los Angeles Police Chief at the time, Daryl Gates, defended the use of an explosive device, declaring it “a sound tactic.” Gates also stated that Mayor Goode had “provided some of the finest leadership [he had] ever seen from any politician” and that he hoped Mayor Goode “ran for national office.” Michael Nutter, then an assistant to a city councilman, said “[MOVE] is a group of people whose philosophy is based on conflict and confrontation.” Roy Innis, who was the chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), called Mayor Goode’s handling of the crisis “heroic.” Tom Cremans, the former director of Accuracy Systems Inc., which sells munitions to police departments, said “the police exercised remarkable restraint in not using the device earlier.” However, the bomb squads of many cities were reluctant to

⁹ Wagner-Pacifi, *Discourse and Destruction*, 87-94; Assefa, *Extremist Groups*, 111-113; Nagel, “Psychological Obstacles,” 6-8.

¹⁰ Wagner-Pacifi, *Discourse and Destruction*, 95-96; Assefa, *Extremist Groups*, 113; Nagel, “Psychological Obstacles,” 9.

comment on the incident, not wishing to criticize their fellow officers.¹¹

Despite those speaking in favor of the mayor and the Philadelphia Police Department, not all law enforcement officers were complimentary of Philadelphia’s handling of the MOVE crisis. The director of the American Federation of Police, Gerald Arenberg, believed “They broke every rule in the book” when it came to their handling of the incident. James Fife, a police lieutenant in New York City, described it by saying, “They burned down the village to save the village” before adding that the actions taken by the Philadelphia Police Department were “really unheard of.” Arenberg stated the Philadelphia police “just weren’t using all the equipment available to any modern police department.” The MOVE bombing captured the attention of the world, and as many law enforcement agencies weighed in on the actions of the Philadelphia police, so too did the media, both national and international.¹²

Front pages of many newspapers showed pictures of smoldering row houses in West Philadelphia.

The media took a largely critical view of the incident and Mayor Goode. Many newspapers around the world were unsympathetic to the siege of the MOVE house and called Philadelphia a “war zone.” Front pages of many newspapers showed pictures of smoldering row houses in West Philadelphia. The *Washington Post* referred to the pictures as resembling “war-torn Beirut” and the *New York Daily News* called the bombing “a terrible, unnecessary, and costly blunder.” The bombing attracted international attention with newspapers in France paying considerable attention to the incident. The *France-Soir* had an aerial photo of the devastation, and *Liberation*, a French tabloid, called it “one of the most unbelievable urban guerrilla operations that America has ever known.” In Moscow, a newscaster reported “six dead, 60 houses destroyed, hundreds homeless—such is the sinister result of a bloody slaughter which was launched by police.” The *San Francisco Chronicle* was extremely

¹¹ Ron Wolf, William K. Marimow, Steve Lopez, and John Woestendiek, “How the Bomb Decision Was Made,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 17, 1985; Tom Infield, Doreen Carvajal, and Robert J. Terry, “MOVE Letter Threatened Fire: Sent Two Days Prior to Assault,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 20, 1985; William K. Stevens, “Police Drop Bomb on Radicals’ Home in Philadelphia,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1985.

¹² Tim Weiner, “Experts on Police Procedure Criticize Bombing of House,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 15, 1985.

harsh in its criticism, writing there was “no excuse” for the bombing and it was “an astonishing example of overkill.” The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was also critical, calling the bombing reckless and including comments from people such as Burton Caine, the president of the Philadelphia chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, who called the bombing “totally unjustified,” and New York City mayor Edward Koch, who stated that “if [he] had a police commissioner so stupid to allow a bomb to be thrown into a house, [he] would remove him.” *The Dallas Morning News* focused on the residents of the 6200 block of Osage Avenue. Kevin Young called the bombing “unjustifiable” and said Osage Avenue “is not a battle zone.” Another resident said that he was “totally disgusted” with the city and how it had handled the crisis. These harsh comments about the administration and its actions were widespread after May 13, 1985 but only for a short period of time. The national news moved on after a few weeks of reporting on MOVE, and eventually only the *Philadelphia Inquirer* was doing any meaningful reporting on the aftermath of the bombing.¹³

Despite all these critical reports, some newspapers were more supportive of Philadelphia and the mayor. The *New York Times* referred to MOVE as a radical group, focused more on the complaints from the neighbors against MOVE, and framed the incident as a city reacting against behavior that was well out of the norm for a working-class African American neighborhood. In the *Times* article, Dee Peoples, the owner of a store two blocks away from the MOVE house, said that “all you hear is aggression. You sleep with it, you wake up with it, you live with it.” The *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote about the group’s strange philosophy and how while it was, in theory, a “philosophy of anti-materialism, pacifism and concern for the environment,” in practice “its history was replete with violence, obscenity and filth.” The *Chronicle* article stated that former MOVE member Donald Glassey had testified John Africa “had planned an armed confrontation with police and had MOVE members make bombs and buy firearms.” The *Lexington Herald-Leader*, like the *Times*, described MOVE as a radical organization and defined the cause of the siege as MOVE refusing “to leave the house under an eviction order from police.” The *Herald* article also discussed neighbors’ complaints of “assaults, robberies, and a stench at the house.” The positive media surrounding the administration shielded it from dealing with the harsh realities of their actions and

13 Jane Eisner, “Media Blitz: West Philadelphia Disaster Makes Front-Page Headlines Around the World,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 16, 1985; “Police Overkill,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 15, 1985; “Police Tactics Questioned – Experts Call Use of Explosives in Siege Situations ‘Reckless,’” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 15, 1985; “225 Left Homeless by Philadelphia Fire – Uprooted Residents Sorrowful, Angry; Mayor Defends MOVE Incident,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 15, 1985.

allowed it a reprieve from the negative media of the bombing. The Philadelphia administration’s actions during this crisis were highly criticized and opinion was divided among news sources in the city and around the globe, but it was a much different story among the Philadelphia public.¹⁴

The national news moved on after a few weeks of reporting on MOVE.

Many believed they were receiving biased news reports. One woman from Valley Forge stated she “believed the mayor did a commendable job,” and “[the press was] questioning the mayor too much.” Tourists visiting Philadelphia in the aftermath of the bombing had a similar reaction: “MOVE? It could have happened anywhere.” One resident of Northeast Philadelphia, Eli Teper, complained the police “used too little force” and “criminals should be treated as such.” Steward Beatty, also of Northeast Philadelphia, thought the bombing was justified and it was “nice to see that somebody can still make decisions instead of doing nothing.” Steve Harmon, a resident of West Philadelphia, said the bombing was “like Vietnam.” While the media and the police around the country were divided on the incident, most people in Philadelphia appeared to see it as a tragedy but remained supportive of the mayor and the city overall.¹⁵

The media’s discussion about the incident shifted closer to the view of the public. While it was a tragedy, most blame rested on the shoulders of MOVE. Two days before the bombing, MOVE sent a letter threatening to set fire to their row house and the neighboring house should the police attack. This letter began, “If MOVE go down, not only will everyone in this block go down, the knee joints of America will break and the body of America will soon fall.” Then the letter threatened, “Before we let you mutha f-s [*sic*] make an example of us we will burn this mutha f-in [*sic*] house down and burn you all up with us.” The city administration began using the letter to blame MOVE for setting the fire that burned down sixty-one houses and killed eleven people. Police Commissioner Gregore Sambor stated it was his “personal opinion” that MOVE “started or assisted” the fire, and was “convinced that MOVE people saturated those roofs with gasoline.” Mayor Goode said the letter showed MOVE was “a group that was bent on absolute destruction, a group

14 Eisner, “Media Blitz”; Stevens, “Police Drop Bomb”; “MOVE’s Strange Philosophy of Militancy and Escapism,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 15, 1985; “Radical Group Holds Police at Bay,” *Lexington Herald-Leader*, May 14, 1985.

15 Joyce Gemperlein, “Visitors Say the City’s Image Will Survive,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 19, 1985; Stevens, “Police Drop Bomb.”

that was, in fact, a guerilla group inside an urban area.” The mayor also stated that the release of the letter was not meant as evidence that MOVE started the fire but that the letter “says what it says, in [his] opinion.”¹⁶

The city attempted to paint MOVE as the aggressor, framing the actions they had undertaken as merely providing law and order.

In lockstep with the theory of MOVE burning down the street, the city began to discuss how the entry device used was extremely safe and could not have caused the fire. The explosive used in the bombing was known as Tovex TR-2, manufactured by the DuPont Company, which described Tovex TR-2 as “one of the safest explosives on the market.” Before the decision to use Tovex on the house, the Philadelphia Police Department secretly tested different explosives on lumber structures; however, Tovex TR-2 was not meant for above-ground buildings but was instead developed primarily for underground mining. The media began to use the DuPont Company’s label of Tovex as an extremely safe explosive to push the idea that the fire was not the fault of the city. Mayor Goode took issue with the word “bomb” as well, explaining that “what [he] approved to be used was an entry device, which was to take and somehow remove the bunker from the top of the house. There was no intent to destroy the house.” The city attempted to paint MOVE as the aggressor, thereby framing the actions they had undertaken as merely providing law and order, despite it being clear that the aggression towards MOVE was excessive.¹⁷

Shortly after the bombing, and amid calls for an official investigation into the administration’s actions, Mayor Goode announced his intentions to create a special commission to examine the incident. William J. Green, Mayor Goode’s predecessor, said the MOVE Special Commission “has serious, tough questions to ask [the] administration about how it conducted itself,” and “there are many, many unanswered questions and in some cases contradictions that cannot and should not and must not, if faith is to be restored, be swept under the rug.” The former mayor also said the city should release the police intelligence files on MOVE so “everyone in Philadelphia would know what the premise of [the] decisions were.” Despite Green’s harsh words on the city’s actions, Robert S. Hurst, then-president of Lodge 5 of the

Fraternal Order of Police, said “the ultimate responsibility of the widespread property destruction remains squarely on the members of this terrorist organization known as MOVE,” and public opinion in Philadelphia supported this idea. In a poll conducted by Teichner Associates of Philadelphia, 71 percent of respondents believed the mayor did a good or excellent job dealing with MOVE.¹⁸

The MOVE Special Commission hired several people to conduct the investigation. James R. Phelan, one of the FBI’s explosive and counterespionage experts before he left the bureau two years earlier, and Charles King, an expert in the cause and spread of fires, were brought in to investigate the explosives used in the bombing. The original report on the explosive device indicated the only explosive used was Tovex TR-2. However, three months after the incident, Officer William C. Klein testified he had included a second explosive, C-4, in the device when he had assembled it. The commission also hired six other investigators to work under the lead investigator, Neil P. Shanahan. These investigators came from Connecticut, Chicago, Virginia, and Maryland, as well as the Philadelphia area. William H. Brown III, chairman of the commission, said the “search for the highest-quality, professional investigators [was] long and wide-ranging.” Brown added these investigators brought “the skills and expertise essential for the investigation to fulfill its mandate.” The investigators specialized in anti-terrorist programs, major violent crime, and homicide. As the inquiry continued, it became very critical of how the city managed the MOVE incident.¹⁹

As the MOVE Commission’s hearings occurred, the testimonies began to paint Mayor Goode in an unflattering light. In his testimony, the mayor portrayed himself as misinformed and misled by his subordinates, claiming he was as much a victim as a leader. He depicted himself as a leader who confirmed the decisions others made. This was odd, as Goode’s managing style as both city manager and mayor was very detail oriented. An assistant to the District Attorney, Bernard L. Siegel, testified before the grand jury that he had heard “the mayor [say] to the police commissioner, ‘You are the professional and you need not keep me advised of all the details.’” When the District Attorney, Ed Rendell, was asked about this statement, he thought it was “somewhat unusual for Wilson [Goode]” before adding that the mayor’s “management style has always been to get involved in all the significant details.” The hearing revealed the mayor’s

¹⁸ Larry Eichel and Robin Clark, “MOVE Death Toll Reaches 11; Goode to Pick Panel for Probe,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 16, 1985.

¹⁹ Larry Eichel, “MOVE Commission Hires Former FBI Explosives Expert,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 6, 1985; Larry Eichel, “Commission Hires 6 Investigators,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 19, 1985.

¹⁶ Infield, Carvajal, and Terry, “MOVE Letter Threatened Fire.”

¹⁷ Wolf, Marimow, Lopez, and Woestendiek, “How the Bomb Decision Was Made”; Infield, Carvajal, and Terry, “MOVE Letter Threatened.”

attempts to distance himself from the MOVE incident as it was occurring by purposefully asking to not get all the details. This opened Goode up to considerable criticism, the most significant from former mayor William Green, who said Goode was pushing a theory of “reverse Nuremberg” responsibility: he could not be responsible for the incident because he had only accepted the recommendations from his subordinates. Charles Bowser, a member of the commission, criticized Goode in a less direct way, stating “the only person who had the foggiest notion of what was going to happen when the bomb dropped was a police lieutenant.” While these hearings demonstrated there was a major issue between MOVE and the other residents of the 6200 block of Osage Avenue, they also showed there had been poor communication, inaccurate or incomplete intelligence on the organization, and incompetent leadership.²⁰

When the MOVE Special Commission reached a decision on the actions of the administration and the police, its report stated Mayor Goode and his administration displayed “reckless disregard for life and property.” The report stated, “dropping a bomb on an occupied row house was unconscionable and should have been rejected out of hand,” and “the plan to drop the bomb was reckless, ill-conceived, and hastily approved.” Commissioner Gregore Sambor and Managing Director Leo A. Brooks were declared “grossly negligent” for not calling off the siege. The report also called the mayor “grossly negligent” and said he “clearly risked the lives” of the children who had been killed in the house and this was “unjustified homicide.” The commission found that the mayor “failed to perform his responsibility as the city’s chief executive by not actively participating in the preparation, review, and oversight of the plan.” Goode “abdicated his responsibilities as a leader when, after midday, he permitted a clearly failed operation to continue [at] great risk to life and property.” Despite believing MOVE to be an “authoritarian, violence-threatening cult,” the report declared the 10,000 rounds of ammunition fired into the row house had been “excessive and unreasonable,” and “the failure of those responsible for the firing to control or stop such an excessive amount of force was unconscionable,” especially with children inside the building.²¹

Mayor Goode After MOVE

The MOVE Special Commission’s harsh criticisms of Mayor Goode were labeled as devastating by allies of the mayor, but the newspaper coverage of the report was largely supportive.

²⁰ Larry Eichel, “D.A.: Goode Wanted No Details; Rendell Testifies on MOVE,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 23, 1985.

²¹ Thomas Ferrick Jr., “Report on MOVE Finds Goode ‘Grossly Negligent’ in Decisions: Children’s ‘Homicide’ Is Alleged,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 2, 1986.

An editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, written shortly after the report was released, stated the author “[disagreed] with those who think Wilson Goode should resign” and noted Philadelphians should not just judge the mayor on the MOVE incident, but should instead “judge him on his entire first term.” Mayor Goode also received support from his church followers after the report. The *Inquirer* reported “more than 250 people [...] gathered to pray for Mayor Goode,” and the Reverend U. O. Ifill Sr. described the prayer services as “a demonstration of the endemic support the mayor has in the black community.” Despite the findings of the MOVE Special Commission, Mayor Goode’s support in the city stayed strong and grew thanks to these efforts by local organizations and newspapers. This outcry of support for the mayor hid the actions he had taken and lessened the loss of life in the most important event of his career.²²

Despite the findings of the MOVE Special Commission, Mayor Goode’s support in the city stayed strong.

In the years after the MOVE disaster, Wilson Goode’s reputation began to recover. Over a year after the MOVE incident, Goode said that “[he] had some difficult days and difficult times in [his] administration, but [he had] done a lot of good, constructive things.” John F. White Jr., a city councilman, said “the administration has demonstrated far more experience over [the] year.” The incident faded from public memory, overshadowed by Goode’s more successful endeavors, such as ending a strike involving 14,000 city employees, which created more confidence in him and his administration. When the city experienced a major trash and sanitation issue, Mayor Goode proposed a trash-to-steam plant to be built in the Philadelphia Navy Yard. When several police officers were arrested on bribery and corruption charges, Mayor Goode helped restore the department by implementing a reform package. In the initial aftermath of the MOVE disaster, it seemed that Goode’s political career was over, but over the following two years he worked tirelessly to repair his image.²³

²² Acel Moore, “Bringing on the Problems: Wilson Goode Sometimes Is His Own Worst Enemy,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 20, 1986; Russell Cooke, “Praying for Goode: The Faithful Rise Up,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 13, 1986.

²³ Russell Cooke, “For Goode, A Year of Recovery,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 4, 1987; Robin Clark, “Police Reforms Unveiled: Goode Begins Search for Chief,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 20, 1985; Ferrick Jr., “Report on MOVE.”

In 1988, Goode ran for reelection against former mayor and police commissioner Frank Rizzo. It was a highly contested election, with only a slim margin of 17,176 votes out of 652,307 total votes. In Rizzo's concession, he warned Goode that he would "have to deliver or [he is] going to be right on him." Despite the bad publicity that his actions against MOVE had brought him, the good publicity he had received since allowed Goode to rehabilitate his image and beat Rizzo to become mayor for his second term. Goode's reelection shows how successfully MOVE and the MOVE bombing had been removed from the public eye; even though nothing truly changed after the bombing, people had moved on.²⁴

Thirty Years Later

Thirty years after the MOVE bombing, National Public Radio looked back at MOVE and learned that many young Philadelphians never even knew it had occurred. Tasneema Raja, an editor on an NPR show who grew up only twenty minutes north of Philadelphia, never learned about MOVE in class but instead learned about it from her father. NPR's Gene Demby, who grew up in South Philadelphia in the 1980s, also never discussed MOVE in class. Robin Wagner-Pacifici, who studies fringe radical groups at New York City's New School, believes that other radical groups never identified with MOVE's anti-technology, pro-animal rights, and quasi-Rastafarian beliefs, leading the group to be forgotten in discussions of radical groups. Groups similar to the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, and the Weaver family in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, held overlapping beliefs and would mention each other in their manifestos, but "none of them mentioned MOVE." Unlike the Branch Davidians who faced off against the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, or the Weaver Family who were besieged by the FBI, the Philadelphia police department bombed MOVE. This was not a showdown between a fringe radical group and the federal government, but with the local government. A lack of connection between the general public and MOVE's core beliefs, as well as the city's general ambivalence toward the group, caused the MOVE bombing to fade into obscurity. MOVE generally has only one article written on it each year, usually on the anniversary of the bombing or about the MOVE 9, and only receives minor mention in articles about events the group attends. This relative obscurity compared to the other extremist groups has caused the fallout of the bombing to be forgotten.²⁵

²⁴ Christopher Hepp and H. G. Bissinger, "Rizzo Concedes Defeat: Says He'll Remain Active in Politics," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 24, 1987.

²⁵ Gene Demby, "I'm From Philly. 30 Years Later, I'm Still Trying to Make Sense of the MOVE Bombing," *National Public Radio*, May 13, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/05/13/406243272/im-from-philly-30-years-later-im-still-trying-to-make-sense-of-the-move-bombing>. Gene Demby, "Why Have So Many People Never Heard of the MOVE Bombing?" *National Public Radio*, May 18, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/05/18/407665820/why-did-we-forget-the-move-bombing>.

Conclusion

Goode's victory over Rizzo for a second term as mayor was the first sign that the MOVE incident held minimal lasting significance to the city outside of Osage Avenue. The second sign was that schools in Philadelphia do not teach about MOVE; children living in Philadelphia do not learn about an event where the mayor bombs his own city. The MOVE bombing should have ended Wilson Goode's political career, as well as the careers of the others involved in the decision-making that led to the siege of the MOVE row house and subsequent bombing of its bunker. This should have been an event woven into the very fabric of the city; instead, it was forgotten—the perpetrators remained in office and repaired their image, and their victims faded into obscurity. Nothing significant changed after the MOVE bombing: there were no major changes to policy or regulations in response to MOVE or police actions, and for the residents of Osage Avenue all they received was a city bombing their homes.²⁶

This should have been an event woven into the very fabric of the city; instead, it was forgotten.

The MOVE bombing is an enormous black spot in the history of Philadelphia, and yet its occurrence is rarely, if ever, mentioned. That the bombing held no lasting impact in the psyche of Philadelphia is an affront to the deaths of those eleven MOVE members. Despite two grand juries on the bombing, no one from the city administration ever faced any consequences resulting from their part in burning down sixty-one houses and killing eleven people, five of them children. The city administration did their best to rehabilitate their image and move past the bombing without suffering any consequences, aside from a lawsuit paid to the surviving MOVE members. Reports of the MOVE bombing began as highly critical but over time became supportive, enabling the administration to shift the blame for the bomb and subsequent fire onto MOVE, eventually leading to the reelection of Wilson Goode and allowing the MOVE bombing to become largely forgotten. That the MOVE bombing left no major lasting effect on the city of Philadelphia is a disgrace and a disservice to those whose homes burned in the blaze and those who perished as a result of the city's actions.

²⁶ The homeowners on Osage Avenue had their homes rebuilt, but now most are abandoned due to shoddy reconstruction.

Author's Note



Charles Abraham ('20) graduated with a major in History and minors in Anthropology and Classical Studies. From Warrington, Pennsylvania, he enjoys being outside, whether that means relaxing, hiking with friends, or working in the garden.

Charles says that seeing "MOVE" finally published is "incredible": "It means that all of my hard work paid off. I want to thank Dr. Hyser for putting up with my absent-mindedness and for pushing me to do my best."

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