

Episode 9: Liberation, strained relations and the rise of Black power

by Jeff Meade

Episode 9 of the "In Pursuit" series focuses on 1968-1990, a turbulent time in Philadelphia's history as well as the nation's. It begins with the rise of police commissioner and eventual mayor Frank Rizzo and his focus on order against a backdrop of civil unrest and antiwar protests, and ends with the election of the city's first Black mayor, W. Wilson Goode, and the infamous firebombing of the MOVE compound.

Author and historian Nathaniel Popkin, writer of the "In Pursuit" series, offers his reflections.

Q: Race relations lie at the heart of the episode. How much do you think race relations changed or improved over the span of the episode, from the days of Frank Rizzo as police commissioner to the bombing of the MOVE house and the destruction of a neighborhood?

A: A broad spectrum of voters came together to elect W. Wilson Goode as mayor in 1983. After years of racial division, police brutality and violence under Frank Rizzo, people were seeking a new way. For the first time, Black Philadelphians felt they had a legitimate stake in city government.

But the episode explores the many personal and societal dimensions of the great structural disjuncture that defines this period: As soon as African Americans gained a political and economic foothold in the American city, the industrial jobs that were the framework of urban life vanished. The tax base diminished just as Black leaders



Nathaniel Popkin

finally got power, and these factors set up a new round of revanchist racism that still defines, for example, the perspective many Harrisburg lawmakers hold toward the residents of the city of Philadelphia.

Q: The relationship of the police to the city's minority community is another prominent thread. In some ways, from 1968 to 1990, it seems like nothing changed at all. There were charges of brutality at the beginning and charges of brutality resulting in the deaths of children in the Africa compound. Did the bombing of the MOVE house signal the onset of police reform?

A: For the residents of Osage Avenue who charged the Goode administration with perpetrating "structural racism," nothing much seemed to have changed. And because Goode failed to manage the situation of MOVE making their neighbors' lives miserable, it came down to the police, the same Philadelphia Police Department that continued to follow a policy of disproportionate rage against MOVE. They sought revenge for the killing of Officer Ramp in 1978, and they were quite willing to take out a majority Black neighborhood to get it.

Q: Even with the bombing of the MOVE compound, how would the tenure of Wilson Goode be regarded today?

A: Goode was hamstrung by the societal disinvestment in cities. Where Rizzo had Nixon to rain funds down on Philly, Goode had Reagan, who turned the spigot off, and whose policies openly penalized poor people. So Goode had no easy task. Then he tragically mishandled MOVE. I think it underscores how hard it is to manage a city, especially one still in economic collapse.

Q: What lessons do we still need to learn from that turbulent period?

A: The greatest lesson, I would say, is that no one figure will ever save you, no matter your position or beliefs. The city is a product in some sense of democracy. The more we practice it, the better the city can be. The more we get involved, organize, engage, the more is possible. And I will say — the greatest lesson is about the role that journalism plays in a democracy. The era of this episode was the golden age for reporting, for investigative projects, for raising truth to power. Never was an age before it and never has been since. And, oh boy, do we miss having such an active, motivated, creative, relentless press.

Episode 9, followed by a Q&A, will screen on Thursday, Nov. 12, at Woodmere's Smith Hall, 9201 Germantown Ave., Chestnut Hill. Doors open at 6 p.m. and the film starts at 6:30 p.m. RSVP to attend the screening and discussion, inpursuit.tv/attend-a-screening.

About the 'In Pursuit' film series, local viewing schedule

"In Pursuit: Philadelphia and the Making of America" consists of 10 hour-long episodes releasing throughout 2026 and into early 2027. In partnership with the Chestnut Hill Local — as a public service to educate our audience about Philadelphia's role during this 250th anniversary of our nation — all 10 films are being screened for free in locations throughout Northwest Philadelphia and Springfield Township. Each screening will conclude with a panel discussion led by local experts. Doors open at 6 p.m.; film starts at 6:30 p.m.

The series is directed by award-winning filmmaker Andrew Ferrett, written by author Nathaniel Popkin and produced by West Mt. Airy's Sam Katz, winner of the 2021 Library of Congress Lavine/Ken Burns Prize for Film.

RSVP to attend a screening and discussion, inpursuit.tv/attend-a-screening

So far, future screenings of episodes are as follows:

- **Thursday, Nov. 12**, Woodmere's Smith Hall, 9201 Germantown Ave., Chestnut Hill (Episode 9: Liberation, 1968-1990)
- **Monday, Nov. 16**, Chestnut Hill College, 9601 Germantown Ave., Chestnut Hill (Episode 6: Wealth, 1876-1917)
- **Thursday, Dec. 3**, Free Library of Springfield Township, 8900 Hawthorne Lane, Wyndmoor (Episode 3: Independence, 1763-1790)
- **Wednesday, Jan. 13**, Germantown Friends School, 31 W. Coulter St., Germantown (Episode 4: Common Ground, 1790-1838)
- **Tuesday, Jan. 27**, Germantown Jewish Centre, 400 W. Ellet St., Mt. Airy (Episode 7: Renewal, 1925-1963)

Episode 9 summary: 'Liberation' (1968-1990)

From the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. to the bombing of the MOVE house, Episode 9: "Liberation" traverses years of startling upheaval and profound struggle, as older American cities seek a way out of economic obsolescence, poverty and rising crime. What could America's birthplace mean to the nation in the year of the Bicentennial?

With documentary testimony by those who experienced these conflicts firsthand, "In Pursuit" moves into the late 20th century with a balanced look at how real urban residents navigated political and economic swings while working to shape the world for the future. At the heart of the story is the political rise of police commissioner Frank L. Rizzo, an ally of President Richard M. Nixon, who learns how to exploit media attention to consolidate his power, becoming mayor in 1971. Until that attention — in the form of investigative journalism by, among others, Andrea Mitchell, Gene Roberts, Buzz Bissinger and the late J. Whyatt Mondesire, all on-screen featured voices in the episode — exposes corruption, police brutality and the mayor's penchant for punishing perceived enemies.

The daily public struggle between journalists and the mayor comes to a head in the approach to 1976, the 200th anniversary of the birth of American democracy, as civil rights, anti-war and



An anti-Vietnam War protest in Philadelphia.

gay rights groups demand justice in the streets, activism that further enrages the mayor. One such group is the lesbian collective DykeTactics, hounded by the FBI; another is the radical back-to-nature front MOVE, whose confrontations with the mayor result in a blockade and then a gun battle that leaves a police officer dead and nine MOVE members in jail.

Organizing the Black electorate results in the election of W. Wilson Goode as mayor in 1983, like Harold Washington of Chicago and Tom Bradley of Los Angeles, and Coleman Young of Detroit, the first African American to be elected to the position in the city's 300-year history. All these men are children of the Great Migration.

Goode fails to contain MOVE's transformation of their new house into an armed bunker; he permits the police to use violent means to try to forcibly remove MOVE members, including children. When that fails they drop an explosive device on the bunker and refuse to allow the fire department to put out the ensuing fire, which rages the night of May 13, 1985, consuming three blocks, killing 11, including five children, making 250 people homeless. No one is ever made liable for an act that comes to signify the tragic decline of a great American city.

Director: Andrew Ferrett
Writer: Nathaniel Popkin
Executive Producer: Sam Katz
Producers: Andrew Ferrett, Jonathan Kohl, Nathaniel Popkin, Eva Roben
Editors: Adam Rosenbloom, Rachel Sophia Stewart
Director of Photography: Paul Van Haute
Narrator: Michael Boatman
Composer: Daniel Slatkin

