

## CITY LIFE

# MOVE: An Oral History

For years, the hostility between the city and the radical West Philly group MOVE had escalated. But nobody was prepared for the horrific way the fight would end one May afternoon in 1985. Now, decades later, the people who were there that day tell the still-unbelievable story.

by **VICTOR FIORILLO** • 3/26/2010, 6:00 a.m.

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MOVE Hearing: John Costello/Philadelphia Inquirer

**Gregore Sambor**, former police commissioner, in testimony to the MOVE Commission, October 17, 1985: We had lessons from sad experience. In the spring of 1977, we had hoped that armed threats would disappear if pacified. By the fall of that year, we had

^ thought that an indefinite state of siege would starve MOVE into submission. By August of 1978, we hoped that an overpowering police presence ... would intimidate MOVE to peaceful surrender. The plan for May 13th was the most conservative, controlled, disciplined and safe operation that we could devise based upon these lessons.

**William Richmond:** Late Friday, I get a call that there was a meeting at the police administration building on Saturday morning. At the meeting, we were told that Sambor would make a pronouncement by bullhorn for MOVE to exit the house. If they didn't exit, we'd start the squirts and throw water at quite a volume to neutralize the bunkers. Then the police would get the tear gas in. But we hadn't been out there. The planning was terrible.

**James Berghaier:** We were going to breach walls in the basement and second floors and use tear gas, leaving the first floor as an escape for MOVE people. And I think, I'm okay with this.


**Theodore Price:** On Sunday, May 12th, 1985, the police told us that we had to go somewhere and stay. I went to a hotel on Baltimore Avenue.

**Ramona Africa:** We knew something big was about to happen. Police told people to go out and visit family, that they could come back the next night. Boy, were they wrong.

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**Michael Nutter:** In 1985, I was Councilman Ortiz's chief of staff. He asked me to look into the situation that Sunday. There were police barricades, news vans, and a general sense of tension in the air. I talked through a screen door with Ramona Africa. She expressed that the family was upset about the members locked up, and they were prepared to take whatever actions necessary to try to make their release happen. Soon, there was increasing presence by the police, specialized officers, SWAT teams. I was out there most of the night.

**Tommy Mellor:** We get out to the house at 4 or 5 a.m on Monday. It was very quiet. Dark. Eerie. I was carrying a tear gas machine.

**William Richmond:** I rode out on the squirt truck. This was the first time I had seen the bunker or Osage. We positioned on 62nd Street. That's when we saw the trees in our way, and I thought, *The squirts aren't going to reach.*

**Michael Nutter:** Police presence significantly increased again. The power had been turned off. And then the commissioner made an announcement that the folks should come out of the house.

**William Richmond:** I'll never forget it. "This is America ..." he started.

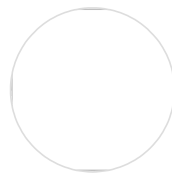
**Ramona Africa:** He said, "Attention, MOVE. This is America. You have to abide by the laws and rules of America."

**Frank Powell:** Then one of them gets on the loudspeaker and calls the commissioner a motherfucker.

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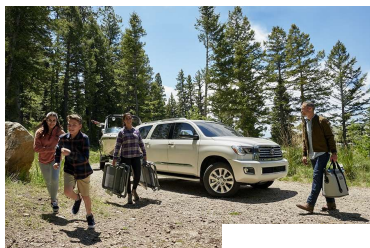
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