

Ivy Stevens had been looking forward to the 13th of July for weeks. She and her husband had planned their big night out long in advance, and as it approached it was hard not to be excited. It had been a dreadfully muggy, oppressive day, with temperatures heading well into the 90s, and Manhattan's crowded streets sweltered with noise and sweat and heat. It was still dreadfully hot and humid that evening, and it was a relief, therefore, for Ivy to walk into the air-conditioned light and coolness of the World Trade Center. Its gleaming towers still only a few years old, and ride the elevator 107 floors up to windows on the world, the elegant restaurant that looked out across the city. And of course the evening was every bit as exceptional and memorable as she had hoped. From her table she could see the whole of the city laid out beneath her, a patterned blanket of blinking lights beneath a darkening sky. It was amazing, she said later. We were looking out at the most spectacular view in the world, New York at night, when suddenly it disappeared. Now that Dominic Sandbrook was written by a top historian of 1970s America in his magnum opus, *Mad as Hell*. And that author I think was commissioned to write 140,000 words, and he ended up writing 500,000 words. So hundreds of thousands of words had to be cut. And that author, Dominic, was yourself. But these chapters on 70s America that had to be cut are all so good. So never let anything go to waste, Dominic. Listeners may remember the two episodes we did on the fall of Saigon, which we kind of cannibalized chapters that you had to cut. And today we are doing the same with a chapter on New York in the 70s. And we're doing that because we're recording this episode as part of the tour that we're doing of the United States. We did a show in Washington. And as part of that, we did an episode on Martin Luther King's Great Speech, I Have a Dream, which was the previous episode that went out. And now we've come to New York, we're in Central Park. And we are recording an episode that kind of begins with a blackout, the great blackout on the 13th of July, 1977. So this is what Ivy Stevens is looking for on the world trades, the top of the World Trade Center. She's watching the lights across Manhattan go out. The city vanishes, Tom. The city vanishes. Yes, hello, everybody. We are in Central Park, which is looking particularly fine today, I have to say. So if you hear a bit of noise in the background, that's what that is. Central Park, of course, today, Tom, a more salubrious place, I think it's fair to say that it would have been if we'd been there in the summer of 1977, as we will see. And the blackout itself, which will be familiar to some American listeners, but probably not so familiar to those outside America, and maybe even outside the city. The story of the blackout itself, we'll start with that, and then we will widen it out to talk about crime and the politics of New York in the 70s, which is a fascinating story. So the blackout happens for various complicated reasons. Do you want to go into them? Sure. The technical reasons. Explain it in detail. When people listen to the rest of history, they listen to it mainly for my knowledge of electricity generation techniques. The rest is industrial technology, is what we're all about. So New York and cities like it occasionally did suffer blackouts and brownouts, as they were called in the 60s and 70s. And this one happens basically when lightning strikes an electricity substation on the Hudson River. So in that bit of purple prose that you read out there about Ivy Stevens and her evening out, I mentioned how humid it is. I mean, anyone who's been to New York in mid-summer knows it can be suffocating, these stifling, and kind of thunderstorms in the air, which is exactly what happened this night in July, 1977. So lightning strikes this substation, and there's a particular company that provided

the electricity to New York, ConEd, Consolidated Edison, and it had a systems operator on the day called William Jurith. He basically is in charge of blacking out individual bits of the city to reduce demand on the other power lines so that the power lines won't burn out. And he's slow to do it. Because reading your account, it actually reminded me of Chernobyl. You always think things could always be worse. So he's in the control room, and it's all going wrong, and he's paralyzed. Because it happens within a very short space of time. He has very bad luck because he's fiddling with the lines, and then lightning strikes again, and knocks out another line. Now what that means is that the remaining lines are carrying more load

than they can bear, and they start to burn out. Unless you reduce the demand, then more lines will burn out, and that, of course, piles more pressure on the lines that are remaining, and you're into a situation where they'll all burn out.

God, this is so impressive.

This is absolutely a very detailed knowledge, Tom. The power pooled dispatcher of New York State, a man called William Kennedy, he rings Jurith, and he says to him, you've got to start shutting bits of the city down, because otherwise the whole thing is going to blow. The minutes tick by, one line after another goes down. Eventually, there are only two lines into the city left carrying electricity. They're from Long Island and from New Jersey, and he is given the direct order. You have to basically shut this down now, and he's, again, slow to react. All lines out of the city or into the city rather end up burning out. So the city is reliant just on its own generators, and at 927, I think it is, the whole system collapses, the whole system grinds to a halt, and all five boroughs of New York City... Yeah. In that instant, every line in the city flickered off, all five boroughs quite suddenly lost power, subway trains, we still halt, elevators, air conditioners, televisions, refrigerators, everything stopped. So very traumatic and like a movie, because the thing about New York is that almost everything that happens in New York is like a movie, and New York is the great home of the disaster movie. And this is the disaster movie to end all disaster movies, Tom. So the only lights that are left are the aircraft beacons on top of the Citibank building and the World Trade Center and the flame and the torch of the Statue of Liberty. So everything else has gone completely pitch black. And the thing is, this is not unprecedented. So it had happened before in 1965, when 25 million people in New York, New Jersey, and New England had been left for hours without electricity. And in parts of New York, again, in 1977, it's fine. So Ivy Stevens, I mean, she tells her story to the newspapers. She's just somebody who's into it. And she'd gone out to the restaurant. And actually, it's lovely. It's all very civilized. It's all very civilized. People bring champagne, they have a lovely time. The Metropolitan Opera, the harpist strikes up, dancing in the dark. On the upper east side of the restaurants, they move all the tables out into the streets. It's too hot to be inside, no air conditioning. And they illuminate them with car headlights. People improvise and it's very fun and memorable. And so this is the New York of Annie Hall of a Woody Allen comedy. It's the civilized city. But New York in the 1970s is increasingly becoming a byword for urban dystopias. Exactly. And so what happens elsewhere when everything goes dark? So the extraordinary thing is that within moments of the blackout happening, the looting and the fighting starts. So in Alphabet City, for example, down towards the bottom of the island of Manhattan, people almost immediately start ransacking the

shops, smashing the windows, grabbing stuff. On the upper west side, there are stories that store after store is pillaged 61 shops between 63rd Street and 110th Street alone. On Broadway, just south of Columbia University, there are stories about people driving up to hi-fi shops with their trucks. They attach a hook to the grill, to the kind of gate, and then they drive a rip the gate off, and then it's open season, everyone gets in and helps themselves. Well, you've got a very, I mean, a particularly poignant episode on Outstanding Avenue, a crowd break into a clothing store and just kind of make off with everything. And there's this middle-aged black woman outside pouring feebly at the looters with a broomstick. No, don't do it, please. They work so hard. Don't, don't. Yeah. So they're actually quite tragic. Tragic scenes, people. Some of these are family businesses who are effectively on the verge of losing everything when people start looting. So Manhattan is bad. It's bad in Manhattan, but it's worse in the Bronx. So in the Bronx, 473 shops attacked, 961 looters are arrested. There's an ace Pontiac car showroom, and 200 people forced their way into this showroom. And because of drive off. And they just drive off with the cars. They're driving for 50 cars, one by one. They find a sort of single file through the glass, out into the street. Brooklyn, even worse than the Bronx, there's 700 stores in Brooklyn were gutted, looted, burned, a thousand people arrested. And there's one neighborhood in particular that becomes synonymous with the blackout of 1977. It's called Bushwick. So Bushwick is off in northeastern Brooklyn. And by this point, it is predominantly black and Puerto Rican. And we'll talk a little bit later in the podcast about these neighborhoods where the demography had changed massively in the 1960s and 1970s. So Bushwick already in the 70s had a reputation for very high levels of people on welfare, very high levels of violence and vandalism. It's not basically not a place where tourists go Tom. So it's the kind of the reaches of Gotham City that Batman would be clearing up. The Batman will be clearing up or Batman might be slightly out of his depth. Really? Okay. Okay. That bad. So in Bushwick, I mean, we don't need to go through all the sort of stats and stuff. But all the descriptions of it are that in the center of the neighborhood, gangs are moving through within moments. It's as though they've been prepared, they've been ready, which of course they weren't. But people start moving through looting shop after shop. They use trucks, they load furniture, high-fives, televisions, all of these things. I mean, the thing is that I remember living through the London riots in 2011 when basically, I mean, it was a kind of a frenzy of looting. And people just kind of got caught up on it. Everybody was just piling in. And this is what happens basically. It is what happens. So it's some, I mean, here's one quote, people were grabbing shirts, pairs of pants, anything running around and laughing. It was though they were suddenly free. So that's a radio reporter who's up in Harlem. This is a cop. A cop says, the looters swept through here like locusts. I've seen looting before, but this was total devastation. Smashing, burning as if people have gone crazy. They were like blue fish in a feeding frenzy. And it's not just, you know, the urban poor, is it? It's kind of affluent shoppers in midtown in Manhattan, kind of breaking in, grabbing pants. You've got the story of a woman who's spotted stuffing a bag of ice into her very expensive designer handbag. Her Louis Vuitton handbag, yeah. She's stuffing a bag of ice into it. And the manager or somebody sees another customer sees her and says, I'll call the manager and she drops it and flees.

But you think, what the heck, if she's got enough for a Louis Vuitton handbag?

I mean, this is very much a kind of Gotham city theme, isn't it?

Oh, yeah.

Of the crowds going wild.

It's that fear that underpins so many stories about New York, actually. The Batman story about Batman as the vigilante bringing order to this city that is permanently on the brink of anarchy. Right. And that has kind of currency because the NYPD, New York police, are overstretched and deeply

mistrusted and kind of ravaged with corruption. And so they also are not in a good state.

They're in a terrible state. And we'll get onto this in the second half,

just why the NYPD are in such a terrible state in the 70s.

But to go back to Bushwick, this place, which is the absolute epitome, the embodiment, the symbol, the avatar of the lawlessness of that evening in the summer of 1977, the looting doesn't die down in Bushwick until just around about dawn. And when the sun rises, it reveals this neighborhood that has been, it's basically been gutted. It's as though the people of the neighborhood have sacked their own city. Well, can I read from your book, Dominic? Please do, Tom. Do you think the listeners would like to hear more of your prose? I imagine they probably wouldn't, but I'm sure you're going to do it anyway. Okay, I can read it. So along Broadway, this is in Bushwick. No fewer than 34 stores have been looted. 45 had also been set on fire. Most of Bushwick's buildings were made of timber and asphalt, a devastatingly flammable mixture. At one point, two entire blocks had been ablaze. When fire crews had reached the scene, they had been bombarded with rocks and sticks by jeering looters. And the police had even resorted to using a water cannon to protect the firemen. Now, in the cold light of morning, 20 fires still burned and a cloud of black acrid smoke hung over the area. It was a scene from a war zone, a battlefield. It was a scene from the end of the world. And the potency of that scene, from the point of view of those, you know, in the broader world, is again that this is New York. Right, exactly. There's a line by a guy I think is from the Miami Chamber of Commerce, so I was going to come up with it a bit later in the podcast, but it's appropriate now. He said, we knew exactly what to expect from New York, and they didn't let us down, which I think is a very sort of telling moment. So to cut to the chase, more than almost 2,000 stores were looted. There were 1,000 fires across the city. Roughly 4,000 people were arrested, and that is merely a fraction of the numbers that could have been arrested. The police at one point, Tom, are told to stop arresting people because they can't fit them into the cells. And they're also told, the time you're taking, you're arresting people, is a time where you could have been on the streets. So they just beat looters up. So they just say, go and crack heads. Go and crack heads to try and stop it. So the costs are in the hundreds and hundreds of millions. And when does the power cut finish? So the power comes on towards the end

of the following day. Right. So there's only one night. So it's one night and the best part of one day in intense heat. Anyone who's been to New York in the summer mode, imagine what it's like with no air conditioning, no fans, just stifling, stifling heat. And of course, for the press at the time, they see this as a symbol of all that's gone wrong with New York, which we'll get into. And there's one paper in particular, which we should talk about, which is The New York Post, whose headline is 24 Hours of Terror. It's a banner headline. And why The New York Post? Because The

New York Post just a few months earlier had been taken over. It'd be found by Logan Roy. By Logan Roy, exactly. So The New York Post, a newspaper founded by hip hop star Alexander Hamilton, had been taken over by Rupert Murdoch. So Logan Roy is the fictional incarnation of Rupert

Murdoch in succession, the TV drama. British listeners will know Rupert Murdoch very well, as of course our American listeners will too. At the time, British newspaper readers would have known his name because he was the owner of The Sun. He's Australian, isn't he? He's Australian, are the most aggressive tabloid, the most popular tabloid someone should that year, 1976, at the time when he took over the post, just overtaken the mirror to become the biggest selling newspaper in Britain. Now, at the time, people said Murdoch will never hack it in America. He won't be a success. We won't like his formula. And they were, of course, completely wrong.

So The Post, which is a kind of working class, democratic newspaper, he said, we need to beef this up. What our readers want, they want a lot of stuff about crime, they want scandals. They don't have the page three topless.

They don't have topless girls in America. Which is a notorious thing that The Sun has.

Which, yeah, The Sun had in Britain. Everybody attacks Murdoch and says he's a carpet bagger, who cares about Australians. He brings in loads of British and Australian journalists to run The New York Post, which is very controversial among American journalists.

Because the London newspaper scene is actually much more competitive than the New York scene. Much more competitive, frankly, Tom, much more exciting. You know, much because it's more cut throats. You get better papers. And to Murdoch, the New York scene is very staid.

And so he and The Post seize on the blackout and they run story after story, front page after front page. And it sells kind of massively. They sold tens of thousands of extra store, extra copies based on their coverage of the blackout. So Rupert Murdoch is, I mean, he's very conservative. He's very much on the right. So is he going in with a kind of law and order, string them up, kind of approach?

Absolutely, absolutely. So The New York Post's attitude is the word that recurs again and again, which will make, I should imagine, many of our listeners shudder, is animals. They say again and again, the looters are animals, the looters are scum, the looters are the lowest of the low, all of this kind of thing. Now, that's a very common refrain on the right in America in the 70s. So somebody who's-

On the other left saying it's poverty.

They are indeed.

Deprivation.

So to give you an example, somebody who's appeared on their podcast before, Ronald Reagan, Tom, well, he, yes, he blames the sixties. He says this is the legacy of the sixties.

All the conservative papers, the conservative columns are full of all this stuff, human animals, the lowest of the low, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

The liberal papers, including the most famous New York paper of all the New York times, are shocked by this. This is racist. You can't call people animals. And actually, the cause is unemployment. So Jimmy Carter, who was president in 1977, he does not condemn, he does not say this is all because of criminality. He says it's because of unemployment. It's a protest against unemployment. That is the most common refrain among liberals. Now, the New York Times runs editorial after editorial, and precisely these lines, and gets an absolute

torrent of letters from readers who are appalled. So I'll just read you a couple of letters. So this is from a fellow in Long Island. He says, your editorial was overloaded with the type of decrepit cliches, still believed only by sentimentalists, professional liberals, and your editorial board. The scars are inflicted by publicly funded demagogues who pander to our permanently established rabble. It's bad form to tell these parasites that looting vandalism, arson of the violent crimes, and no knows, it's so much more profound, so much more chic to blather on about the debts which our society owes to its destroyers.

It's a very strong, pungent stuff, Tom. Pungent, yes. Pungent stuff. A man from Manhattan, Hendrick Root, I don't know how to pronounce his name. Hendrick Root and Beak. Hendrick Root and Beak.

Maybe he came over with the Dutch, and they found him. A Dutch holdout from the Amsterdam.

He says, the warning should have gone out that every looter should be shot on the spot.

The Puerto Ricans can go back to Puerto Rico. They belong there anyway. And if the blacks don't shape up, they can go back to the south. Now, these are shocking sentiments to us, and to many of our listeners, I imagine. But at the time, they are absolutely widespread.

There was this sort of, you know, America is in the grip of a kind of backlash, I guess, against what's seen in the excesses of the 60s. Right. So Reagan's election is three years away, and you can see the outline of the, well, tough on crime, basically. Not so much tough on the causes of crime. Absolutely. So Reagan, who's already been going around campaigning as welfare queens, as he calls them. We talked about this in our Reagan podcast. So Reagan who...

Well, I mean, it's shocking stuff from Patrick Buchanan, who, I mean, much further to the right than Reagan, right? Yeah. If hunger was in the back of it all, how come some of the welfare mummies filmed ripping off jewelry, clothing, and liquor stores lumbered about like overfed heifers who could use six months on a liquid protein diet? Yeah, that is pungent stuff.

That is, yes. But he's, I mean, he's a quite a serious political figure, isn't he?

Well, he had been, he worked for Nixon and then become a columnist at the New York Post's rival, the Daily News, I think it was. But Dominic, one thing, I mean, one thing about this, perhaps a point of intersection between the left and the right, between liberals and critics of the permissive society is that a lot of the looting, rather as that woman who I mentioned saying, please don't do it, please don't do it, are themselves black.

The victims of the looting. Yeah. Absolutely right, Tom. So a lot of these stores are black-owned.

So in someone like Bushwick, those stores are owned by sort of black families, often husband and wife operation, kind of family businesses. And, you know, a lot of those people, there's this sort of ruin because they're not covered by insurance. If you don't have insurance, you're in real trouble. And actually one of these sort of great historic African American papers in New York, the Amsterdam news, ran a front page editorial that was either reprinted or quote or extensively quoted by every other newspaper in the city. This is a newspaper by African Americans,

for African Americans. And they had no time for the unemployment excuse. Well, come on to the levels of unemployment in the second half. They said, it would be self-destructive and suicidal for us even to imply that we accept joblessness as a reason justifying looting. The looting was criminal, outrageous, and damnable. We cannot accept this behavior of our young people. We love them too much. We love our communities too much. We love those striving black businessmen and business

women too much. It has taken us too long to get where we are to accept such destructive behavior. What comes across from all this, whether it's on the left or the right, black or white, whatever, is basically a kind of feeling of impotence and paralysis, a sense of a crisis that is so enormous, that people don't really have solutions, that they're kind of falling back on their gut political instincts, their gut prejudices to explain this. But the scale of the crisis is really too great for any explanation. And again, just to reiterate, because New York is what it is, it is the representative city of America. It is the city that people imagine when they think of urban America. Therefore, it is amplified globally in a way that it wouldn't be even in LA or Chicago. I think that's right, Tom, but I think there's something else on top of that, which is that cities have riots. I mean, any city has the potential for a riot or for disorder. These things happen. They happen after football matches or... We talked about the 2011 riots in London.

Exactly. But the 1977 business feels different, even to people at the time, because it resonates because it expresses a kind of deeper truth about 70s New York, which is what we're going to get into. This sense that this wonderful urban project has turned into a living nightmare, that the city is a cesspit of crime, of corruption, which you see in so many Hollywood films in the 70s. And that, I think, is a fascinating story, and that's what we'll get into. Shall we do that after the break, Tom? Let's do that. Okay. Very good. We'll take a break now, and we will return in the cesspit of crime and corruption of 70s New York. Fun times.

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Hello, welcome back to The Rest is History, and we are looking at New York in the 70s, because I remember I was growing up in the 70s.

You're not in New York, Tom. You're growing up in Wiltshire.

I was growing up in Wiltshire. Exactly, I was. Very much a place without drive-by shootings and graffiti and all that kind of thing. And my sense of New York was absolutely that it was the most terrifying place on earth. And if I went there, I would probably get shot.

So my association in New York was a terrifying place. It wasn't home of glamour. It wasn't, you know, the place that you can make it there. You can make it anywhere.

It wasn't Mad Men or anything like that. I will get shot if I go there. I was kind of

eight. I was going to tease you and say this is penetrating analysis, but actually it's true. That's what people did think in the 70s. So it's kind of gut instinct. And had you been born 20 years earlier, you wouldn't have thought that. No. Because New York in the 50s and 60s was perceived abroad and in America as the epitome of everything that was most glamorous, most dazzling about American life. It's Don Draper in Mad Men. People are drinking martinis. It's breakfast at Tiffany's. Audrey Hepburn. If you've ever seen, lots of our listeners will have seen North by Northwest, you know, Kerry Grant. The cool of the city. The stylish lines of the buildings. Sharp suits. Great dresses. Exactly. Exactly. And that begins to change, I would say, towards the end of the 60s. So at the beginning of 1966, New York gets a new mayor who's called John Vleet Lindsay. He is the person for whom the phrase, which some of our American listeners will be familiar with, limousine liberal was applied to. And he is the absolute personification of kind of patrician, old money, the old elite, if you like, an elite that you can sort of trace back to the novels that Henry James needed thwart and kind of gilded age in New York. So Lindsay went to a boarding school. Americans don't often talk about this, but a large part of their elite go to boarding schools. So Lindsay went to a boarding school and he went to Yale. He's a very JFK-ish figure. He's young, handsome, sporty, civilized. And in the symbolic moment, on the day he takes office, there's a transport strike and he has to walk to work. And that sets the toe for the whole of his administration. So there's constant strikes, money problems, rising crime. And actually, the issue is that something has gone badly wrong for New York as it has for so many American cities in the 60s. And actually, that anticipates what's going to happen to lots of cities elsewhere in the Western world. Right. So with your Marxist hat on. What is happening is the expression of very, very deep-seated economic evulsions and changes. So what are they? So the flight of manufacturing, New York would be in a great manufacturing city. The garment district in New York is the great symbol of that, people making all these clothes. Well, that's been outsourced and it's happening abroad. Suburbanization, white middle-class people in particular are moving out to the suburbs. But also, there's a big shift in America generally from what's called the Rust Belt. So those are the old industrial art lands. Detroit is the kind of classic. Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati. Great cities. Great cities that've been the powerhouse of America. But in the 70s, the booming cities are Dallas, Phoenix. Because they've suddenly got air conditioning. Because they've got air conditioning. Exactly. I mean, it seems like such a banal thing that air conditioning is one of the great transformative moments in American demographic history. Because now you can go and work, establish factories in the South and Southwest, where, by the way, they have quite restrictive anti-union laws. So for an employer, it actually makes sense that you can build factories and things from scratch there. Whereas in a city like New York, infrastructure will often be quite antiquated. Exactly. Yeah, it's crumbling infrastructure. Crumbling infrastructure. So lots of, particularly, sort of more affluent, more educated, white families moving out of New York and lots of new people moving in. But this is nothing new. The whole thing about New York, it's actually liberty,

huddled masses. It's that waves and waves of immigration come in and the city gives them jobs. But is it the case in the 70s that for the first time, there aren't the jobs available?

There are two things. One, there is a class of people that had always been there in New York, which who are now leaving, who are the more affluent people, or sort of someone like Brooklyn, or the Bronx, even, white working class, kind of inverted commas, and this is, I know it's a heavy loaded word, sort of respectable working class families, they are moving out to the suburbs. And the people who are... New Jersey.

Yeah, exactly. To purpose-built estates and things. Whereas the people who are moving in, there are lots of migrants from the Caribbean, from Central America, from Puerto Rico, or African Americans from the South. Now in the past, as you said, loads of such people arrived in New York City, but there were jobs. But actually now there are not jobs. The economic obstacles to the newcomers are much greater than ever before. So in the month of the blackout, July 1977, seven out of 10 African Americans in New York are out of work and eight out of 10 of the Hispanic population. So massive, massive unemployment rates. Now as a result of that, you get into a vicious spiral. And Tom, I warn you, there's going to be a tiny, tiny bit of economics. Oh, goodness. So we've had industry, and now we've got economics.

Well, we've had the analysis of electricity generation, and now of tax bases. Because of course, when you've got high unemployment, you've got fewer people paying a lot of tax, but you also have much bigger welfare roles. So what you have is that New York is making less money, but it's liabilities. And having to spend more. And that's not just New York. So Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, some of those cities we mentioned. Well, Detroit, I mean, is basically collapsing. Well, it's not yet collapsing, but it's on the process of approaching the brink of it. So they're running up tens and tens of millions of debts, but nowhere is it worse than New York. So the merility of that guy that I mentioned, John Lindsay, ends up in a complete sort of disaster as he runs into financial problems. The city is losing hundreds of thousands of jobs every year. The deficit is getting bigger and bigger. So in 1974, when Lindsay gives way to a new mayor, already the city has this reputation as a financial basket case. I mean, this is the New York Times itself, Tom, talking about its own city. In 1974, New York City has become a metaphor

for what looks like the last days of American civilization. It's run by fools. It's citizens at the mercy of its criminals who often are not protected by an unholy alliance of civil libertarians and crooked cops. The air is foul. The traffic is impossible. Services are diminishing and the moral is such that ordering a cup of coffee in a diner can turn into a request for a fat lip. New York City is a mess and it's getting worse all the time. So great stuff for the New York tourist board. Yeah, it's a great advert for the city. January 74, a new mayor comes in and he's basically a symbol of New York. He's a guy, he's very short. He's called Abraham Beam and he is the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, classic kind of people that you'd get. They're moving to the Lower East Side where so many Eastern European Jewish immigrants did. He was born in 1906. Like so many bright Jewish poor boys, he benefited from free education at the City College of New York and then he became a democratic kind of machine politician. He was the financial controller. So he's meant to be the person with the figures. He becomes the mayor. When he comes in, the city is facing a complete financial meltdown. So he is basically having to borrow money at interest rates of 10% just to pay the city's workers. Which presumably include cops, firemen and people who collect the litter.

All of those things, all of those things. But people weren't learning the money. By the spring of 1975, he's basically staring into the abyss. He gets a loan from the state, New York state, but that way that even won't cover his own payroll. So he has to go to the federal government. Ronald Reagan, Tom, your mate, do you impersonate so well? Ronald Reagan said, New York can just save itself. He said, New York must prove that it can handle itself. We shouldn't lend them any money. But Ronald Reagan's rival, Gerald Ford, his president, he obviously can't really allow the city to sink. But there is a famous headline, isn't there? There is. In the New York Post. Ford to city, drop dead was the headline. Because they've asked him for a loan. They asked him for a bailout and he said, no initially. Actually, that's a bit unfair on Ford. Because Ford does change his mind. He gives them a \$2 billion loan guarantee bailout. Because if he didn't, the city would have collapsed. So the point where he does it, Abraham Beam, the mayor, has just fired 63,000 people, including 10,000 teachers, 4,000 hospital staff, and thousands upon thousands of police and firemen. And this is an absolutely extraordinary story. So he fires all these people. He has to fire them. Thousands of people walk out. And the police, in particular, the police union go absolutely ballistic. So if you'd flown in, Tom, on holiday, for a wheelchair, they would have given you at the airport. The members of the union would have greeted you with a leaflet that said, welcome to fear city. And would have told you, don't use the subway or don't leave your hotel after dark. You see, my father basically didn't like going to Salisbury. So there was no prospect of us going on holiday to New York. Well, to fear city. Also, there are millions of very fat rats scurrying everywhere on there. Yeah, that's right. So you're the winter of discontent in Britain? Yeah, it's nothing. It's pitiful. This is like years of the winter of discontent. But with police handing out these leaflets, you're going to be shocked. I mean, at one point, policemen who've been sacked block Brooklyn Bridge, and then they put up barricades on Brooklyn Bridge and then throw beer bottles at people's cars. It's absolutely, I mean, it really is like a Batman film or something. Right. But Dominic, just to reiterate, I mean, the impact of this is in part because America and the world has a sense of New York that what happens in New York is always kind of extreme. It is, you know, the ultimate global city and basically has been throughout the 20th century. I love New York. I don't want to sound like we're reveling in this sort of dystopian nightmare because I actually love New York. Yeah, of course, but you can love New York and revel in dystopia. I mean, that's kind of the whole point that, you know, you have awful things happening in New York and somehow it's material for a movie. Yeah, of course, it's material for movies. So, I mean, we'll get into the films in just a second, just on the last word on the NYPD, by the way. The NYPD, I mean, Tony, our producer who's listening to this is just in disbelief at some of these stories, but the NYPD had an appalling reputation in the 70s. So there's been a very famous story about this guy called Frank Serpico. Some people may have seen the film. Yeah, the Al Pacino film. Al Pacino. Serpico would be the first officer to speak up publicly about corruption, for which his colleagues would shoot him in the face and then set him up and sort of framed him during a drugs raid. And he had testified and the story ended happily and he ended up being played by Al Pacino. But basically, there's a big investigation called the NAP Commission into corruption in New York City. And they find out that basically lots of officers have been

taking bribes from drug dealers, from pornography merchants. They've been selling heroin and cocaine they have been, but they betray their own informants to the mob. And Dominic, one thing they haven't been doing really is solving crime. So you give the amazing stats between 1966 and 1973.

The murder rate in New York went up 173% and rape by 112%. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, New York becomes...

This is a problem, by the way, not just in America. It's a problem in lots of cities across the Western world. I don't want to sound like we're beating up any of the New York or America. Well, but New York has become the embodiment of this problem. Because then New York recovers. So the depth of the decline is what then sets up the... Of course, the recovery in the 1990s and after.

And there are two elements, by the way. Let's go back to the blackout for a second. In that summer, July 1977, they capture public attention. So the first is the problem of gangs, of young people's gangs. So just a few days before the blackout, Time magazine had run a cover story

in what it called the Youth Crime Plague. Most extraordinary claim. People have always accused kids of getting away with murder. Now, that's all too literally true. Across the US, a pattern of crime has emerged. There's both perplexing and appalling. Many youngsters appear to be robbing and raping, maiming and murdering, as casually as they go to a movie or go to a baseball game.

But, Don, I mean, this is kind of standard moral panic, isn't it? I mean, people...

Oh, there is a moral panic, absolutely. I mean, it's kind of...

We had it with Mods and Rockers in Britain.

Yeah, but this is on a different league. So, Tom, do you remember? I went to a summer camp when I was a boy. In America?

No, in England. And they're sort of... They're teenage volunteers who are going to be looking after us who are about nine, decided that the appropriate film to put on was a film directed by Walter Hill, released in 1979, called The Warriors. Have you ever seen that?

I remember The Warriors. Yeah, it's based on Xenophon.

About the March of the 10,000?

The March of the 10,000. So a Greek army of mercenaries who get stranded in the middle of Iraq and have to get back to the...

Back to Greece.

Back to the sea.

And they have to sort of march their way fighting.

So this is what happens in the film. There's even a character called Cyrus.

Yes.

So either the gang is called Cyrus.

Yes.

And he says, let's all the gangs join together and take over the city.

And one gang gets stranded or something and have to fight their way out of New York, I think.

I mean, it was absolutely terrifying when I saw it.

I was eight and I think it's an 18 certificate film.

So anyway, so there's a massive moral panic about gangs, about youth crime.

The scale of that is not accurate. I mean, they're hyping that up.

These are the armies of the night. They are 100,000 strong.

They outnumber the cops five to one. They could run New York City.
That's the tagline of the posters.
No, but there were 20,000 gang members in New York City.
So a lot.
Yeah, a lot.
The other thing that's a big panic is...
Now, some of our listeners have been waiting for this because they'll remember it.
Son of Sam, the serial killer.
So the disco killer, as he's called, he killed six people in Queens and in the Bronx
between the summer of 1976 and the summer of 1977.
And he is basically the kind of the love child of Jack the Ripper and the Joker.
Right. Golly.
Just as Jack the Ripper sent a letter to the police.
So Son of Sam sends a letter to the Daily News columnist, Jimmy Breslin.
He does.
Hello from the gutters of NYC, which are filled with dogmineer, vomit,
stale wine, urine and blood.
So more excellent copy for the New York tourist board.
Hello from the sewers of NYC, which swallow up these delicacies when they are washed away
by the sweeper trucks.
Hello from the cracks in the sidewalks of NYC and from the ants that dwell in these cracks
and feed on the dried blood of the dead that has settled into these cracks.
So great stuff.
I mean, you said about New York being like a film set.
I mean, the Son of Sam stuff feels like a Batman movie, a really dark Batman movie.
I mean, he kills six people.
And presumably is an influence then on subsequent kind of dystopian portrayals.
Undoubtedly.
Because Batman in the 60s is Adam West.
It's all, you know, it's a joke.
It's kind of very funny.
But then subsequently Batman has become a much darker figure.
Right.
And presumably that is kind of drawing on the legacy of this age.
Oh, undoubtedly.
So the Joachim Phoenix portrayal of the Joker.
I mean, it sounds very Son of Sam.
Yeah, the Joachim Phoenix or the Heath Ledger Joker, actually.
Yes.
In the Christopher Nolan films.
Exactly.
Because Son of Sam, who is actually a person,
he's a loner, classic serial killer, guy called David Berkowitz.
He's constantly sending letters to Jimmy Breslin to this columnist.

I am the monster.
I love to hunt.
I'll be back.
I will haunt you.
All this sort of thing.
So you might well say, well, why just before we get into the more about the films,
why is crime out of control?
There's one very banal.
Well, if they've sacked all the police.
Well, they've sacked all the police.
But crucially, they've opened the floodgate.
They've opened the gates of New York psychiatric hospitals.
Again, very Batman.
Yeah, Arkham Asylum.
So in a series of decisions, partly there's been pressure for years for community care,
community mental health, don't institutionalize people.
The Supreme Court has ruled in 1975 that people who are mentally ill can't be detained
unless they are definitely a threat to other people.
So across America, hundreds of thousands of people who previously had been in hospitals.
I mean, it also helps if you want to make cuts, by the way.
There's budgetary reasons.
So they've basically been decanted onto the streets.
Many of those people are now homeless, roaming the streets in Manhattan and elsewhere.
Those scenes that many of us who've been to New York,
particularly went to New York in the bad old days,
will recall of people pushing their possessions in kind of chopping trolleys
or dragging them behind them.
I mean, these people are often former psychiatric patients
who've basically been abandoned by the system and thrown out onto the streets.
So there are some estimates that in the early 1980s,
about between a third and a half of the city's homeless population
were previously people who'd been having treatment
who were basically thrown out onto the streets.
So there's this sort of sense.
And you take that, the lack of jobs,
the degradation of the urban environment because of the financial problems.
There is the lack of human resources,
the lack of police, of sanitation workers, of firefighters.
Then there's drug addiction.
And then there's also the fact that the city's environment itself
has been radically reshaped by planners like the most famous guy,
a guy called Robert Moses.
Robert Caro wrote this fantastic book called The Power Broker about
about how you reshape New York with expressways,

cutting through what had once been settled,
kind of contented working class neighborhoods,
buildings, entire streets, entire blocks ripped out
to make way for these kind of underpasses and overpasses and things.
So there's a sense that the city has lost its self-belief.
It's lost its sheen.
Lost its soul.
Yeah, lost its soul.
All the glitter and glamour.
I mean, there's a very famous moment that epitomizes this in the Bronx.
So the South Bronx have been eviscerated by the Cross Bronx Expressway,
this disastrous project that ripped through neighborhoods.
Is that the expressway that in Bonfire of Vanities?
Oh, yeah, it might be, actually.
The Tom Wolf novel, where the yuppie accidentally goes off the wrong.
I think you might be right, actually, Tom.
I mean, you're right, because Bonfire of the Vanities,
the Tom Wolf book, is written, I suppose,
to the very end of this period, in the 1980s.
The musts of the universe have returned to Wall Street.
Right.
But there's still that kind of dread of what happened.
You know, the sense, well, I suppose,
to kind of house and have knots by that point.
Exactly.
But the Bronx is also home to Yankee Stadium.
And in the World Series in October 1977,
so we're talking just a couple of months after the blackout,
the Yankees are playing the Los Angeles Dodgers.
And while the game is on TV,
there's a building behind the stadium that has caught fire.
And the announcer, this guy, Howard Cosell,
who is one of the most famous American sports commentators says,
there it is, ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning.
And those words kind of the Bronx is burning
became this kind of catchphrase, this metaphor
for the immolation of the kind of East Coast urban dream.
And that, of course, is the background, Tom, for all those films.
So we said we'd talk about films.
We could spend the rest of the podcast just listing them.
Saturday Night Fever.
Saturday Night Fever.
They embrace disco because they want to escape the reality
of a decaying, decrepit Brooklyn.

And it's a pretty depressing film.
Very depressing film.
Not as depressing as Dog Day Afternoon or Death Wish.
Death Wish is a very dark film.
Or the most famous one, which lots of our listeners
will be familiar with, is Taxi Driver.
So amazingly, given what we're saying about Son of Sam,
Taxi Driver comes first.
So Taxi Driver.
So that's the still feckoned Robert De Niro.
Yes, he is.
I didn't think you'd be going there, Tom, but you did.
He's about 120 now, isn't he?
But he's still fathering those children.
He is.
So he plays in that film, 75.
He plays Travis Bickel, is a Vietnam veteran,
traumatized by the war, drives a yellow cab in New York City.
He is deeply disturbed.
He is disturbed by the seediness, the sleaze, the crime.
I mean, he famously says the city is an open sewer full of filth and scum.
Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.
Yeah.
And he becomes a hero.
I mean, that's the irony of the film.
This very damaged, disturbed man becomes a crime fighting hero
at the end of the film.
He's lauded by the city for having, in a very bloody fashion,
cleaned the scum off the streets, as it were.
And he's a sort of a sick hero for a sick city, I think.
Sick hero for a sick city.
Yeah.
You should be writing movie strap lines.
I'm wasted on history.
So of course, the other thing that all those films are,
are the background for the blackout.
So when the blackout happens, that quotes,
it was, I anticipated in the first half,
from the Miami Chamber of Commerce.
Of course, Miami is one of those cities that has prospered.
While New York has decayed.
It's just about what you would expect from New York.
Most of us expected the worst, and they didn't let us down.
Joe Biden, Tom.

Joe Biden said, New York has seen as the seed of corruption and duplicity.
You know, all this sort of, I mean, people don't feel sorry for New York.
That's the astonishing thing.
There's a line in Annie Hall where Woody Allen says,
everybody thinks we're communist left-wing draft dodging pornographers.
And he said, and I say, is that, and I live here.
And I think that's, you know, that terrible, terrible image.
But New Yorkers take a pride in it, don't they?
I mean, there's kind of sense that, you know,
we're the meanest of the mean.
We're the baddest of the bad, to a degree.
I think after July 9th.
They had enough of it.
Well, because the city then does stage a miraculous recovery.
It's not instant.
No, but by the late 80s, you know, Manhattan again is a byword for wealth and glamour and
sophistication.
It does. And actually, that's another story in and of itself,
which we can't, we don't have time to get into.
But could maybe do it somewhere.
Which we can maybe do at some time.
Yeah. How the city turns it around.
All the controversies about policing in the 1990s.
What was the film in which New York becomes a prison?
And they, and the president kind of crashes into it or something.
Escape from New York with Kurt Russell.
Yeah.
Plays a character called Snake Plisken.
Must watch that again.
So two notes on which to end.
First of all, two consequences that both happened here in New York, Tom,
where we are today, but both had wider national consequences.
So the first comes just a few months after the blackout.
So there's going to be a mayoral election.
And Abraham Beam, this guy we described,
Lower East Side, Jewish immigrants.
The sort of soul of the old fashioned social democratic New York, I suppose.
He is dumped by the Democrats and replaced with a guy who's the future.
Who's a guy called Ed Koch.
And Ed Koch had been.
I thought it was Ed Koch.
Ed Koch.
But you can call him that if you like.
I think it's, I believe it's Ed Koch.

Ed Koch, okay.
I mean, wisely.
A wise choice from Ed Koch, if you want a political career, I think.
Anyway, he had been a loyal liberal Democrat.
And now he says, I'm a liberal, but with sanity.
Meaning tough on crime.
Tough on the causes of crime.
Tough on the causes of crime, exactly.
So he runs in 1977 as a populist.
And he says, you know, he's kind of abrasive and he's tough talk.
He says, I'll crack down on the unions.
I'll crack down on crime.
He talks about a very keen on the death penalty.
All this sort of stuff.
And when he comes in,
he takes what he sees as the tough decisions that beam wouldn't take.
He slashes the city's budget.
He raises all the subway fares.
He confronts the unions.
And Tom, he thinks that the way to,
one of the ways to rebuild the city
is to allow private developers more of a free hand.
Private, I, now.
I'll hunch where you're going with this.
So I mentioned developers.
This is the other thing.
One man's crisis is another man's opportunity.
So as New York declines, decays,
you've got burned out hotels and all the rest of it,
some people see in this a chance to make some money.
Now, there's one place in particular where they see it.
This is a corner of Midtown Manhattan.
It's right next to Grand Central Station.
Grand Central, of course, decaying at the time,
but a symbol of an earlier golden age kind of New York.
So on East 42nd Street between Lexington and Park Avenue,
not a million miles from where we are now,
there was a hotel called The Commodore.
And it had been owned by the Penn Central Railroad,
which had gone bust in 1976.
And the hotel was derelict.
At the time of the blackout, the hotel is completely derelict.
There are rats in the basement.
A lot of the rooms have been taken over by prostitutes.

Supervillains are plotting death rays in the basement,
all that kind of thing.
There's sort of drug dealers everywhere.
It is this sort of vision of an urban hell.
I want ambitious young developer, Tom.
I wonder if you could possibly guess who it is.
Sees this, and he thinks he can turn it around.
So he does a deal with the Defunct Railroad
and with the Hyatt Hotel Corporation.
And crucially, he needs a tax deal from Abraham Beam
from the outgoing mayor.
As luck would have it, his father has precisely
the contacts he needs.
And Beam and the city give him a 40-year tax break
to redevelop this hotel.
So a few months after the blackout,
in December of 1978, well, a year after the blackout,
I should say, he starts work on it.
And it opens in September 1980,
just weeks before the election of Ronald Reagan.
I mean, the timing is unbelievable.
It opens as the Hyatt Grand Central Hotel.
And it's a new kind of hotel, covered with shimmering glass.
Lots of bling, very blingy, absolutely massive atrium, fountains.
So it's right on the cusp of the 1980s,
and it is this temple to what you mentioned,
the bonfire of the vanities, 80 success.
Now, one last thing.
That tax break that I mentioned, that his dad got him,
it costs the city of New York \$410 million.
And Tom.
That's the art of the deal, Dominic.
That is the art of the deal.
And Tom, the name of that young developer.
Should you leave it hanging?
Wow.
If you can't guess by now,
shall I put them out of their misery?
It is, of course, Donald J. Trump.
And on that bombshell, on that bombshell,
we will bid farewell to Gotham City in the 70s, on the cusp of the 80s.
So, yeah.
So I think that we should definitely do New York in the 80s.
It's such a great subject.

Yeah.

I mean, as iconic as New York in the 70s, really.

So thank you, Dominic.

Tom, why don't we go down to the Hyatt Grand Central?

I'll buy you a martini.

That'd be fantastic.

We'll head there.

See you all very soon.

Hope you've enjoyed it.

Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.