

THE LIGHTS WENT OUT  
AND ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE.

# BLACK OUT

1 x 53 HD



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As July 13, 1977 dawned hot and humid, New Yorkers prepared themselves for another sweltering day. But high temperatures weren't the only thing making them sweat: the crime-ridden city was on the verge of bankruptcy; unemployment was high; police and firefighters had been laid off; municipal services, including sanitation and after-school programs, had been cut and a serial killer named Son of Sam was still on the loose, keeping everyone on edge. That evening, a severe thunderstorm hit and lightning struck a power line in Westchester County; when that line went out, the demand was increased on the surrounding lines. As Con Edison engineers struggled to control the cascading effects of the downed lines, their only choice was to start shedding load, disconnecting customers from the grid in order to prevent a catastrophic failure of the system. But despite their efforts, the lights went out, plunging some seven million people into darkness.

Told through the memories of ordinary New Yorkers who lived through the events, including first responders, journalists, shop owners and those inside the pressure-packed control center of Con Edison on West End Avenue, *Blackout* examines what happened when the lights went out.

That night, in the city that never sleeps, the divide between the haves and the have-nots became ever more apparent. In some neighborhoods, there was conviviality, as diners at the Windows on the World restaurant in the World Trade Center were treated to free champagne and allowed to remove their jackets and ties. Helpful citizens took to the streets to direct traffic. Impromptu block parties broke out, and bartenders served patrons in T-shirts and shorts. Upper East Side residents had candlelit dinners on the roof.

But in the poorer neighborhoods of the city's boroughs, the power outage spurred near-immediate mayhem under the cover of darkness. As employees at Con Edison struggled to restore power to the elaborate system, people smashed windows and ripped security gates off storefronts, carting off washing machines, sofas, Pampers, TVs, refrigerators—whatever they could carry. By the time the power was fully restored more than a day later, more than 1,600 businesses had been looted, over 3,700 people had been arrested and firefighters had battled more than 1,000 fires.

"The 1977 blackout reminds us of how easily we take things for granted," says Mark Samels, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Executive Producer. "We expect the lights to turn on, the garbage to be picked up and the trains to run—all these systems keep our daily lives going. But when a city is plagued by crime, unemployment, reduced services and growing anger, an event like a blackout can be the spark that ignites a fire. The thin crust of civilization is suddenly gone and we discover that urban life is much more fragile than we thought."

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## AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

160180

### CREDITS

*Director:* Callie T. Wiser

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