

Ginning Up Racial Strife

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On August 9, 2014, Officer Darren Wilson, 28, a white, six-year veteran of the Ferguson (Missouri) Police force, shot to death an 18-year-old black man, Michael Brown. Brown and a friend, Dorian Johnson, 22, had just robbed a nearby convenience store and were walking to the Canfield Green Apartments, when Wilson, having heard on his police scanner to be on the lookout for men of their description, encountered them. Remaining in his patrol car, the officer ordered the men to get out of the middle of the street.

What happened in the next ninety seconds has embroiled the nation in controversy ever since. The ensuing argument between Brown and Wilson escalated into a fight. Wilson's gun fired twice, and Brown ran away. At this point, Wilson climbed from his car to chase the teenager on foot, continuing to fire. In all, Brown was shot six times, including twice in the head.

The police say that in the initial scuffle, Brown reached for Officer Wilson's gun, a detail that eyewitnesses deny, saying that he had his arms in the air. The grand jury later found that many of these witnesses gave contradictory accounts, one finding among several that led it to rule that no charges would be brought against Officer Wilson for Brown's death.

Wilson said that Brown, who stood 6'4" inches tall and weighed over 290 pounds, repeatedly punched him in the fight in the car. His swollen face and cuts on his neck testified to the brutal struggle. In addition, experts agree that the official autopsy report does not support eyewitness accounts that Brown was shot while running from Wilson or while his hands were raised.

In a post-grand jury interview with ABC News, Wilson said that his conscience was clear about the matter: "The reason I have a clean conscience is that I know I did my job right." While admitting that he was sorry for the loss of Brown's life, he asserted that he reacted as he had been trained and that he would not have done anything differently if Brown had been white.

That, however, is exactly the crux of the matter plaguing America over the last few months. The outcry of the protesters, demonstrators, and looters in Ferguson and elsewhere across the country—facts notwithstanding—has been that the slaying of Michael Brown was a racially motivated murder of an innocent black man. Despite every indication pointing toward a criminal justice system—from police officers to grand-jury members—that worked carefully and dispassionately, the civil-rights juggernaut, a compliant, even activist media, and a sympathetic administration have advanced the notion that blacks, particularly young black males, take the brunt of a heavily racist nation's abuse.

The problem for them is that study after study has found that no institutional racism exists in the criminal justice system. No less than President Barack Obama has repeated falsehoods on this subject, saying during his campaign in 2008, "In our criminal-justice system, African-Americans and whites, for the same crime . . . are arrested at very different rates, are convicted at very different rates, receive very different sentences." A 2012 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll found that 84% of blacks believed that the justice system treats whites differently from minorities.

While a cursory examination of incarceration statistics (for instance, that blacks make up 36% of prisoners nationwide but only 13% of the general population) might appear to support the claim, the disparity is not a result of racial discrimination. Hoover Institution scholar Thomas Sowell points out that the problem with such statistics is that they are “based on blacks as a percentage of the population, rather than blacks as a percentage of the people who do the kinds of things that cause police to stop people and question them.” Simply put, blacks are more often arrested because they commit more crimes.

Are blacks more likely to get harsher sentences at trial? A landmark 1997 study by Robert Sampson and Janet Lauritsen found “little evidence that racial disparities result from systematic, overt bias.” The U.S. Commission on Sentencing reported in 2012 that sentences for black men averaged almost 20% longer than those for white men for similar crimes, yet the Commission warned that its finding should not be taken as proof of discrimination. Why? A study of 58,000 federal cases showed that differences in criminal record, the arrest offense, gender, age, and location explained 83% of the sentencing disparity between blacks and whites.

None of this denies the existence of racist citizens, policemen, lawyers, jurors, or judges. Every part of the country has its instances of racial discrimination, and a great many anecdotal arguments perpetuate the claim that the United States is a racist nation. To the contrary, however, statistics and indicators show Americans to be far less conscious of racial differences and that minorities have greater wealth and opportunity than ever before.

So why are cars and businesses burning in Ferguson, Missouri? Why are tens of thousands protesting in more than 170 cities across America? The facts have stopped mattering in this circumstance, if they ever did. What matters is that this ginned-up racial strife provides an opportunity for powerful people and groups to maintain their power and to push toward their political goals. They will squeeze as much political capital from it as they can and then move on to the next issue.

We should not forget the words of former Obama Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel: “You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that, it’s an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.” The current administration uses such crises as leverage to force concessions from its political foes and advance its agenda to cut America down to size. The Ferguson riots, now spreading nationwide, are—to them—a welcome gift after a dispiriting defeat in the midterm elections.

God tells us plainly that, if we fail to obey Him, “The alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. He . . . shall be the head, and you shall be the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:43-44). That scenario is progressing into reality before our eyes.