**Frustration in Ferguson**



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The response to the killing of the unarmed teenager Michael Brown — whom his family called the “gentle giant” — by the Ferguson, Mo., police officer Darren Wilson — who was described by his police chief as “a gentle, quiet man” and “a gentleman” — has been anything but genteel.

There have been passionate but peaceful protests to be sure, but there has also been some violence and looting. Police forces in the town responded with an outlandish military-like presence more befitting Baghdad than suburban Missouri.

There were armored vehicles, flash grenades and a seemingly endless supply of tear gas — much of it Pentagon trickle-down. There were even officers perched atop vehicles, in camouflage and body armor, pointing weapons in the direction of peaceful protesters.

Let me be clear here: Pointing a gun at an innocent person is an act of violence and provocation.

Americans were aghast at the images, and condemnation was swift and bipartisan. The governor put the state’s Highway Patrol in charge of security. Tensions seemed to subside, for a day.

But then on Friday, when releasing the name of the officer who did the shooting, the police chief also released details and images of a robbery purporting to show Brown stealing cigars from a local convenience store and pushing a store employee in the process.

The implication seemed to be that Wilson was looking for the person who committed the convenience store crime when he encountered Brown. But, later in the day, the chief said Wilson didn’t know Brown was a robbery suspect when they encountered each other.

Something seemed off. The police chief’s decision to release the details of the robbery and the images — without releasing an image of Wilson — struck many as perfidious. In a strongly worded statement, Brown’s family and attorneys accused the chief of attempting to assassinate the character of the dead teen.

Some also deemed it an attempt at distraction from the central issue: An officer shot an unarmed teenager who witnesses claim had raised his hands in surrender when at least some of the shots were fired, which the family and its attorneys called “a brutal assassination of his person in broad daylight.”

The Justice Department is even investigating whether Brown’s civil rights were violated. This would include the excessive use of force. As the department makes clear, this “does not require that any racial, religious, or other discriminatory motive existed.”

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It’s impossible to truly know the chief’s motives for his decision to release the robbery information at the same time as the officer’s name, but the effect was clear: That night, a fragile peace was shattered. There was more looting, although peaceful protesters struggled heroically to block the violent ones.

On Saturday, the governor issued a midnight curfew for the town. A small band of protesters defied it and some were arrested.

The community is struggling to find its way back to normalcy, but it would behoove us to dig a bit deeper into the underlying frustrations that cause a place like Ferguson to erupt in the first place and explore the untenable nature of our normal.

Yes, there are the disturbingly repetitive and eerily similar circumstances of many cases of unarmed black people being killed by police officers. This reinforces black people’s beliefs — supportable by actual data — that blacks are treated less fairly by the police.

But I submit that this is bigger than that. The frustration we see in Ferguson is about not only the present act of perceived injustice but also the calcifying system of inequity — economic, educational, judicial — drawn largely along racial lines.

In 1951, Langston Hughes began his poem “Harlem” with a question: “What happens to a dream deferred?” Today, I must ask: What happens when one desists from dreaming, when the very exercise feels futile?

The discussion about issues in the black community too often revolves around a false choice: systemic racial bias *or* poor personal choices. In fact, these factors are interwoven like the fingers of clasped hands. People make choices within the context of their circumstances and those circumstances are affected — sometimes severely — by bias.

These biases do material damage as well as help breed a sense of disenfranchisement and despair, which in turn can have a depressive effect on aspiration and motivation. This all feeds back on itself.

If we want to truly address the root of the unrest in Ferguson, we have to ask ourselves how we can break this cycle.

Otherwise, Hughes’s last words of “Harlem,” referring to the dream deferred, will continue to be prophetic: “does it explode?”

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