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# OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily reflect or represent the views of The Portland Observer

## Better Late Than Never

The reopening of civil rights-era cold cases

BY MARC H. MORIAL

During the summer of 1960, when the body of 12-year-old Freddie Robinson washed up on the shore of a local creek in Edisto Island, S.C., local law enforcement concluded that he must have drowned accidentally. But Robinson's family suspected otherwise - that he had been murdered for dancing with white girls. Seven years later in Memphis, Tenn., and just a few days after participating in a civil rights demonstration, 16-year-old Larry Payne was found shot to death in a city housing project -- allegedly by a police officer who accused him of looting.

The deaths of Freddie Robinson and Larry Payne are just some of nearly 100 unsolved civil rights-era deaths that the U.S. Justice Department in conjunction with the FBI will consider reopening as part of a widespread agency initiative announced last month.

The National Urban League, NAACP and Southern Poverty Center will also be working with federal authorities to help produce evidence and witnesses that and who could be helpful in solving some of these "cold" cases from a bygone era when, to quote a recent Seattle Times editorial, it was open season on blacks in the South.

Recent successful prosecutions of three high-profile civil-rights-era murders brought out of the cold-case file prompted national law enforcement officials to consider taking another look at unsolved deaths of blacks from the 1950s and 1960s.

In 2001, a jury convicted Thomas Blanton Jr. and Bobby Frank Cherry for the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. In 2003, Ernest Avants got life in prison for the 1966 murder of Ben White, an elderly black farm worker. And Edgar Ray Killen was sentenced in 2005 to three 20-year terms for his involvement in the 1964 deaths of three civil rights workers in Mississippi.

And I have to say it's about time our federal government took com-

prehensive action to wash the stain of the senseless violence against Americans of color throughout the South in the 1950s and 1960s out of the fabric of our society. But better late than never.

Interestingly enough, the news of the new Justice Department initiative, interestingly enough, came down on the same day that a grand jury failed to deliver an indictment against Carolyn Bryant, the wife of one of the suspected killers of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Chicagoan who made the fatal error of whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. Bryant was thought to have been in the truck that hauled Till off to his death. Her husband Roy and J.W. Milam, the two main suspects in Till's killing had died long ago.

The Till case illustrates just how difficult it is for the justice system to deliver indictments let alone con-

But I must respectfully disagree with Mr. Jones. Reopening these cases may seem like a waste of time and resources to some in light of the years that have lapsed. But even if the Justice Department's initiative garners no new indictments or no new convictions, it is well worth the effort. At the very least, it serves as a symbolic gesture of a nation trying to come to grips with a tumultuous past.

African Americans who lived in the South before the civil rights movement know all too well about terrorism - decades before the nation witnessed Muslim extremists slamming commercial jets into the World Trade Center towers on Sept. 11, 2001. The brand that affected southern blacks came packaged differently - or rather euphemistically - in the form of "Jim Crow" or "the Southern way of life."

In the century after the Civil War, southern blacks endured a reign of

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victions in murder cases in which the witnesses are getting on in years and/or the evidence has been lost or damaged or has aged.

Attorney Doug Jones, who in 2001 won convictions against two of the Birmingham 1963 church bombers, expressed skepticism over whether the initiative would break down the reticence of witnesses of murders from so long ago and bring about a deluge of new information in these cases.

"We brought tons of people to the grand jury (for the church bombing case), some of whom I'm absolutely convinced committed perjury, saying they didn't know about something. Could I prove it? No way," Jones told the Birmingham News recently. "But if there was ever a case for people to step forward to do some reconciliation or right a wrong, it was one when four innocent girls were killed in a bomb in a church. And guess what? We didn't have anybody like that."

terror. They watched their homes, businesses and churches burn to the ground. They grieved for their loved ones and friends who were beaten and murdered by lynch mobs.

Not in a million years would the federal government resist seeking justice in the World Trade Center terrorism case. Why should it be any different in the cases of innocent African Americans taken out by lynch mobs in the South? With so many years passed, closure may not come for all the civil-rights era lynchings but at least we as Americans can say we tried to right a grave wrong from our past. That way we are much less likely to repeat it.

Let me applaud the Justice Department and FBI for attempting to prove, to quote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

## NAACP Will Continue to Move Forward

Core values won't change

BY JULIAN BOND

As has been reported, Bruce Gordon has resigned from the NAACP after a 19-month tenure as President and Chief Executive Officer. On behalf of the NAACP, we support him in his decision and thank him for his service. Dennis Hayes, who has served as the General Counsel for the NAACP since 1990, will act as Interim President during the transition phase.

We have had only five CEOs in 60 years - a good record for non-profit organizations. The CEO reported not to the full Board but to a small Executive Committee. As is standard procedure in every organization, the Board sets policy and the CEO is obliged to implement it.

We are naming a search committee to begin identifying potential candidates. We hope that the process will be swift, but our first priorities are assuring quality and the necessary diligence which this position demands.

In the interim, our members, partners, donors and other stakeholders should expect the NAACP to continue to move forward with our daily operations to ensure the political, educational, social, and eco-

nomical rights of all people. Leadership transitions often mandate that we return to fundamentals; there is nothing more fundamental than the advancement, protection and enforcement of the rights we all have as citizens of the United States.

We recognize Mr. Gordon's departure has raised questions regarding the impact the transition will have on the NAACP. We understand these concerns. However, like most organizations that have built a legacy of achievement, we are larger than one individual and as we near our centennial, larger than

and challenge ourselves to be better so that we can push this nation to be better. The NAACP's National Board of Directors is committed to making our organization stronger and to working with our new leadership, our members and other partners to ensure that we are guided by a forward-looking perspective enriched by the lessons of our past.

We live in a world that values evolution and improvement, but unfortunately our country still faces many of the same challenges now we've faced throughout our history. The nuances may shift, but the core issues remain unchanged:

*We have long fought for progressive social change, but we also believe in organizational change that enhances our effectiveness.*

one generation.

We know the NAACP will ultimately be assessed by how we help lead our country to a higher standard. We stand on 98 years of turning dreams into realities. Our efforts have made tangible improvements in the lives of millions.

We are an organization built on change. We have long fought for progressive social change, but we also believe in organizational change that enhances our effectiveness. We have always demonstrated a willingness to look within

poverty, a biased criminal justice system, denial of voting rights, unequal education, and disparities in earning power and job opportunities, lack of healthcare.

Ninety-eight years later, the NAACP is still fighting to eliminate the racism and prejudice that feed these inequalities and social ills. As long as these issues exist, the NAACP will exist as an aggressive force seeking to eradicate them.

Julian Bond is chairman of the NAACP National Board of Directors.