



“Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now”

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The Racial Disparity of Fear

In the years after enslavement, Southern Whites did all they could to return to a manner of slavery. No White “owned” a Black person, but many Whites behaved as if they did. Theoretically, Blacks were free to come and go as they pleased, but if they went to the wrong store, sat in the wrong part of the bus, or failed to yield narrow sidewalks to Whites, they could expect a physical confrontation. All a White woman had to do was cry “rape” for a Black man (and usually the wrong man) was beaten or lynched. Whites expected deference from Black people, and when they didn’t get it, they demanded it with physical threats or worse.

In the months after World War II, 12 million soldiers returned home. Seven percent of them – nearly 800,000 Black soldiers – got something less than a hero’s welcome. Indeed, thousands of Black World II veterans were beaten, often because these men wanted the same rights at home that they fought for abroad. Their sense of dignity and equality seemed to embolden the Ku Klux Klan, which was responsible for soldiers in uniform being pulled off buses, beaten and shot. In some cases, these soldiers had their eyes gouged out; in some cases they were castrated, tortured and lynched.

Whites engaged in the writing of Jim Crow laws that were imposed on Blacks such as vagrancy laws that made it possible to jail a



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Black man because he had no money. These unequal laws made it as easy to find a nearly free labor market as it had in slavery. There was no relief from this unfairness until the late 1960s and early 1970s. And Whites attempting to reinforce the myth of White superiority by reinstituting the practice

If Michael Dunn were so afraid of Jordan Davis and his friends, why did he get out of his car and confront them about their loud music?

of deference found a Black population less ready to defer, more willing to engage the courts (and in some cases the streets) in a quest for equality.

When the myth of White superiority does not work, too many Whites hide behind their so-called fear as a way force deference or provide penalties for those who will not engage in White people’s fantasies. If Michael Dunn were so afraid of Jordan Davis and his friends, why did he get out of his

car and confront them about their loud music?

None of us of a certain age loves loud music, but most of us know how to close a window and tolerate it for a moment or two. Dunn says he was afraid of teens playing “thug” music. Those teens might well have been afraid of him, just as the World War II veterans had been afraid of the KKK. Jordan Davis and his friends might have been as frightened as formers slaves were, when they refused to cross the sidewalk into the streets so that Whites could go first. Some of these Black folks ignored their fear and attempted to exercise their citizenship rights. Some were lynched because they would

not defer to outmoded customs.

Gary Pearl could be Michael Dunn’s evil twin, with a pecuniary twist. In 1983, Pearl left his job as a city sanitation supervisor in Louisville, Kentucky because he says he had a nervous breakdown, which he attributed to having to work with Black people. A psychiatrist testified that Pearl suffered from paranoid schizophrenia; judge ordered that he be paid \$231 per week. The state appealed the award, it was eventu-

ally overturned, and Gary Pearl returned to the obscurity he had before the “fear” defense.

What would happen if every Black person fearing White people got to file for unemployment compensation, or carry a gun around to assuage himself of his safety? Would a jury be as lenient toward that Black man as they were with Michael Dunn? Would they acquit just like the jury acquitted the men who killed Medgar Evers (it took decades for a jury to finally do the right thing). A hard read of history suggests that Blacks have more to fear from Whites than the other way around, but it is Whites, rationalizing their fear, who get to shoot without justification.

A thorough read of history, however, would remind us of the Dred Scott case where the Supreme Court ruled that Black people have no rights that Whites are bound to respect. Clearly, Michael Dunn, George Zimmerman and the others who have Klan sensibilities and invisible hoods, believe a 19th century Supreme Court ruling instead of 21st century realities. For folks like Dunn and Zimmerman, however, the 19th century is not very different than the 21st.

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Betrayed by the Criminal Injustice System

It all seems so familiar, doesn’t it?

A Black man, or woman, or child is murdered by a White person – and America’s criminal justice system compounds the tragedy.

How deep is that particular well of American racial injustice now? How many names of innocents are on that list of sorrow? How many more times will we have to look at the faces of the survivors and see that the pain of the loss of a loved one taken by criminal violence has been etched more deeply by the betrayal of a system that – supposedly – exists to protect them?

In fact, until the civil rights victories of the mid-1960s, being betrayed by the nation’s White majority was the only thing Blacks could count on getting from the nation they helped build and support. Today’s “stand your ground” laws more than 20 states have enacted continue the cloaked-purpose dynamic of the post-1960s get-tough-on-crime and crack-cocaine-versus-powder-cocaine laws—and the 19th century vagrancy laws southern legislatures passed after destroying Reconstruction. They look “race-neutral” on the books but their origins and applications were and are shadowed by racial fear, anxiety, and hatred of Black people. Their goal is not justice but injustice.

But there can be no peace if there is no justice. Isn’t that one of the central lessons of the history of



LAST
CHANCE

Lee A.
Daniels

African Americans in America? Of course, it’s an exaggeration to say the incomplete verdict proves there’s no justice today for Black Americans in America.

For one thing, as other cases in Florida, Arkansas and elsewhere have shown, the trigger-happy

three of his companions who were in the SUV with him that night, will face justice for that crime as well. Prosecutor Angela Corey has been emphatic in stating she will retry Michael Dunn for first-degree murder. Certainly, his actions after the shooting and his whining letters from jail show a deep hatred of young Black people, especially males, and the profound callousness required to twist hatred into murderous action.

However, the sense of tragedy and justified anger at the trial’s incomplete verdict underscores another truth of Black Americans’

bility of Black Americans (and their allies among other Americans) – to redeem the humanity of those whose murders were ordered by the state or condoned by the state or ignored by the state. For all the spectacular progress made since the 1960s, it’s no less urgent that Blacks today continue to bear witness to that responsibility.

So, today, the violence – of language and of murderous action – against Black Americans exemplified by the Michael Dunns of the nation in fact signals that the retrograde force of White supremacy is still losing ground.

That isn’t a “happy” thought when measured against the tragedy that ended the life of a youth who had his whole life ahead of him. The only consolation available to those who seek to fully right that terrible wrong is to remember the most powerful answer to the question of what becomes a tragedy most and stand their ground on the fundamental lesson of Black History – enunciated first by the 19th-century White abolitionist Theodore Parker, and given fresh energy by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Lee A. Daniels is a longtime journalist based in New York City. His latest book is Last Chance: The Political Threat to Black America

Hope remains that the murderer of Jordan Davis, now convicted of attempting to murder three of his companions who were in the SUV with him that night, will face justice for that crime as well

response to being angered – not physically threatened – by the words and actions of others sometimes reflects not racism but rather the pathological need of millions of Americans to consider guns a security blanket and problem-solver.

For another, hope remains that the murderer of Jordan Davis, now convicted of attempting to murder

history: All through the centuries they’ve always had to forge a response to a terrible question: What becomes a tragedy most?

The answer has been exemplified in our present by the conduct of the survivors of Oscar Grant and Jonathan Ferrell and Trayvon Martin, and, now, Jordan Davis: To demand that justice be done. That has always been the responsi-