

June 13, 2014

# Will the Killing of Trayvon Martin Catalyze a Movement Like Emmett Till Did?

Posted: 07/20/2013 1:47 pm

The eerie parallels between the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the murder of Emmett Till 58 years ago -- including the outrageous acquittals of their killers -- remind us that despite many years of racial progress, our criminal justice system remains a bastion of bias and bigotry.

Both boys, African-American teenagers, were in unknown territory, visiting family members. Both had purchased candy (Till bought gum, Martin purchased Skittles) before they met their deaths. Both were unarmed. Their killers had easy access to guns. The defendants in both cases depended on voluntary contributions to pay for their legal defenses. Both trials were media circuses. The juries in both cases took little time to acquit the killers

Till's murder in 1955 galvanized the nation and helped catalyze the civil rights movement. Trayvon Martin's death, and George Zimmerman's acquittal, have sparked protests around the country. But will these protests coalesce into a sustained movement for racial justice?

The verdict in the Zimmerman case has provoked a national conversation about how far America has come in its quest for racial equality. More people now acknowledge that African-Americans, particularly males, are treated differently than whites by police, judges, juries, prison officials and prospective employers once they are out of prison. Michelle Alexander documents this harsh reality in her recent book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Ken Burns reveals it in his new documentary film, *The Central Park Five*, which tells the story of the five teenagers from Harlem (four of them black, one of them Latino) who were wrongly convicted of raping a white woman in New York City's Central Park in 1989 and whose lives were upended by this miscarriage of justice. A new [Urban Institute study](#) reports that when there is a homicide with one shooter and one victim who are strangers, a little less than 3 percent of black-on-white homicides are ruled to be justified. When the races are reversed, the percentage of cases that are ruled to be justified climbs to more than 36 percent in states with "stand your ground" laws and 29 percent in states without such laws.

No one had to cite statistics to Mamie Till-Mobley to convince her that there was little justice in our criminal justice system.

In August 1955, her son Emmett, a 14-year old African-American boy from Chicago, was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi. The eighth-grader allegedly whistled at a white woman in a grocery store after buying some gum, unaware that he'd broken one of the unwritten rules of Jim Crow life in the South regarding relations between blacks and whites. The woman, Carolyn Bryant, was managing the store while her husband Roy was on the road, working as a truck driver. When Roy returned and heard his wife's version of Till's behavior, he recruited his half-brother, J.W. Milam, and at 2 a.m. on August 28, they kidnapped the teenager from his great-uncle's house.

After brutally beating Till, the pair shot him in the head. Three days later, Till's body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River, with a 75-pound cotton gin fan fastened around his neck with barbed wire. His face was horribly battered; his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulged out of their sockets and his mouth was broken and twisted.

Till's body was sent back to Chicago. Huge crowds came to his September 6 funeral. His mother insisted that casket remain open so people could see how her son had been mutilated. In its September 15 issue, *Jet* magazine published a [photo](#) of his face. His killing became a symbol of the many black victims of white "vigilante justice," including the long history of lynching.

[Bryant and Milam](#) were arrested and charged with murder. Neither man could afford a lawyer, but five local attorneys volunteered to represent them for free. At the trial, Moses Wright, Till's great uncle, bravely stood up on the witness stand and identified the two white men who kidnapped Emmett at his home. It didn't matter. On September 23, an all-white, all-male jury took only an hour to acquit both men of Till's murder, despite their admission that they had kidnapped him.

Shortly after the trial, a white southern reporter, William Bradford Huie, interviewed Bryant and Milam and paid them \$4,000 to tell their story, which was [published](#) in *Look* magazine. The two men boasted about killing Till. "As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place," Milam said. They killed Till, they explained, to make an example out of him, to warn others "of his kind" not to visit the South.

The Black community was helpless to convict Bryant and Milam in court, but they exacted another form of nonviolent retaliation. The Bryant and Milam families operated a chain of small stores in the Mississippi Delta that depended on Black customers. After Till was slayed, Blacks boycotted these stores and they [soon were closed or sold](#).

Filmmaker Keith Beauchamp was 10 years old, living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, when he discovered a copy of *Jet* in his parents' study and saw a photograph of Till's face. "It just shocked me," Beauchamp told [The Progressive](#) magazine a few years ago. "Emmett was fourteen years old, and it was like a mirror image of myself -- this young boy who was murdered for whistling. I've always had that vision of Emmett

Till's corpse etched in my head." Beauchamp's remarkable 2005 documentary, *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, weaves together archival photos, newsreel footage and interviews to recount the gruesome story of the murder and its aftermath, including some information that the filmmaker uncovered suggesting that more than two people had participated in Till's killing.

The murder and the trial, and then the confessions in the *Look* story, horrified the country. For many white Americans, it was shocking. For most Black Americans, it confirmed what they already knew. For young African-Americans, growing up in the postwar decade, it was an awakening. Till's murder became lodged in the nation's psychic memory became a font of anger and outrage that galvanized a protest movement that would eventually change the country.

It is no accident that three months after Till's body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River, African-Americans in Montgomery, Alabama began their bus boycott. Rosa Parks, who triggered the boycott movement when she refused to leave her seat on a segregated bus on December 1, 1955, recalled: "I thought about Emmett Till, and I could not go back. My legs and feet were not hurting, that is a stereotype. I paid the same fare as others, and I felt violated."

The boycott lasted for 381 days. About seventeen thousand African-Americans -- almost all of the city's black bus riders -- participated in the boycott, despite threats from employers and others that doing so could cost them their jobs. The boycott succeeded in dismantling Montgomery's bus segregation laws. Equally important, it propelled the civil rights movement into national consciousness. Martin Luther King, then a 26-year old minister in his first job, became a public figure. The boycott's success led King and other black ministers to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which became a major instigator of civil rights protest. The movement picked up steam after February 1, 1960, when four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, organized the first sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter. The sit-in strategy spread quickly throughout the South, led primarily by black college students who formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

The boycotts, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, voter registration campaigns, and other protest activities gained momentum. One of the civil rights movement's major turning points occurred on August 28, 1963 -- 50 years ago next month -- when 250,000 people participated in the March on Washington. As historian William P. Jones recounts in his new book, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights*, it was the largest mass protest in U.S. history at that time. It was made possible because there was a powerful grassroots movement engaged in local organizing around the country. It was called a march "for jobs and freedom" in order to link the demand for full employment with the demand for civil rights. It had both a broad vision and a specific set of legislative goals.

A year later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. The following year, it passed the Voting Rights Act. In 1967, the Supreme Court, in *Loving v Virginia*, ruled that state laws that banned inter-racial marriage violated the Constitution. The civil rights movement dismantled the nation's racial apartheid system in many ways. It was a movement led by African-Americans but they had many white allies. It was a truly inter-racial movement.

Will the killing of 17-year old Trayvon Martin, and the acquittal of George Zimmerman, play the same catalytic role that Emmet Till's murder, and the acquittal of his killers, did more than 50 years ago?

The Sanford, Florida jury's acquittal of Zimmerman has sparked protests throughout the country. It is a remarkable outpouring of anger and frustration. The protests have generally been peaceful and non-violent. The signs and speeches typically demand "justice for Trayvon."

Those are powerful sentiments, but how do they translate into specific changes that will alter social conditions and laws that exploit and oppress people?

The great abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass once said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

We know what the protestors are *against* -- racial profiling, the murder of innocents, the racism of our criminal justice system. But Americans want to know: What are they protesting *for*? What are the specific demands?

The demand that is getting the most attention is the demand that the U.S. Department of Justice file a civil rights charge against Zimmerman. In his remarks about the case on Friday, President Obama appeared to be lowering expectations, observing that these cases are typically handled by state and local authorities.

A DOJ prosecution of Zimmerman would be an important step in giving Martin's family and supporters a sense that his killer did not get off free. It might put one man in prison, where he rightfully belongs. But it will not change the conditions that led the Trayvon Martin's death and the other racial injustices that afflict our society every day.

In that regard, the most obvious demand is to [rescind the "stand your ground" laws](#) that gave Zimmerman his excuse to kill Martin. In 2005 Florida was the first state to enact this law, which permits armed vigilantes to take the law into their own hands. Since then, [25 other states](#) have followed suit.

These "shoot first" laws are the result of lobbying efforts by the [National Rifle Association](#) and the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#), a right-wing lobby group composed of big corporations and conservative state legislators. The NRA and ALEC are the modern equivalent of lynch mobs.

In his comments Friday, President Obama questioned whether these laws "may encourage the kinds of altercations and confrontations and tragedies that we saw in the Florida case rather than diffuse potential altercations." This is a battle worth fighting not only because it will save lives, but also because it will expose and weaken the influence of these two organizations that aided and abetted the killing of Trayvon Martin and many other innocent victims.

Finally, the burgeoning protest movement that emerged after Trayvon Martin's killing and has escalated since Zimmerman's acquittal should join forces with those who have been planning to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1963 march on Washington next month. The original demand for "jobs and freedom" -- full employment, living wages, voting rights and a dismantling of segregation -- remains unfulfilled.

The recent economic "recovery" has not taken hold in most African-American communities, where unemployment and [foreclosures](#) are significantly higher than in other parts of the country. The persistence of racial profiling and other forms of racial discrimination challenges the nation's promise of equality.

According to a [new report](#) by the Economic Policy Institute to assess the progress we've made since the March on Washington:

- Nearly half of poor black children live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty; however, only a little more than a tenth of poor white children live in similar neighborhoods.
- Three quarters (74.1 percent) of black children attended majority non white schools. These segregated schools do not have the same resources as schools serving white children, violating the core American belief in equality of opportunity.
- The black unemployment rate last year was 14.0 percent, 2.1 times the white unemployment rate (6.6 percent) and higher than the average national unemployment rate of 13.1 percent during the Great Depression, from 1929 to 1939.
- After adjusting for inflation, the minimum wage today -- 7.25 -- is worth \$2.00 less than in 1968, and is nowhere close to a living wage. In 2011, a full-time year-round worker needed to earn \$11.06 an hour to keep a family of four out of poverty. But more than a third of non-Hispanic black workers (36 percent) do not earn hourly wages high enough to lift a family of four out of poverty.
- Another [report](#), by the Violence Policy Center, found that black males are nine times more likely than white males to be the victims of homicide -- 29.50 out of 100,000 black males compared with 3.85 out of 100,000 white males.

To honor the spirit and goals of the original march -- during which Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech -- civil rights groups, labor unions, community organizations and others will be mobilizing Americans to demand the renewed effort to push for full employment, an increase in the minimum wage above the poverty level, adequate funding for education from kindergarten through

college and stronger gun control laws to address the epidemic of killings destroys the lives of people across the racial divide, but that disproportionately victimizes African-Americans.

In 1964, at the height of the civil rights movement, the great organizer Ella Baker said: "Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest."

Her words still resonate. Trayvon Martin, like Emmet Till, was a symbol and a son. "Justice for Trayvon" has become a symbolic rallying cry. Now we need a bold inter-racial movement to demand social justice for all of America's sons and daughters.

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