



IN THE NEWS

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Trayvon Martin: A Tragic Catalyst for Change

Introduction

There are events that occur in the course of human history that touch the heart of our nation in profound ways. Very often these events are not new occurrences. They have happened to other people before. However, when they happen at a particular time and place, to particular people, they bring critical issues to the fore, elicit passions from divergent political spheres, dominate news headlines, and occasionally even influence public policy. The Trayvon Martin case is such an event. African American males have been assaulted and killed by people of a different race before Trayvon Martin. In October 2009, Victor Steen was shot and killed by police officers in Pensacola, Florida, after he committed a traffic violation while riding his bike.¹ The officers were cleared of any wrongdoing. In 2011, James Craig Anderson, a forty-nine-year-old African American auto plant worker in Jackson, Mississippi, was beaten and run over by a group of white teenagers who were heard yelling “white power” during the altercation.² Three of the youth pleaded guilty to committing a hate crime.³ Seventeen-year-old Jordan Russell Davis was shot and killed by a white businessman in Jacksonville, Florida, in 2012 because he and his friends were playing the music in his car too loudly. Dunn was indicted for first-degree

murder and three counts of attempted murder.⁴ In each of these cases, local citizens protested the deaths. Some, especially the Davis/Dunn case, were covered in the national news. However, they did not inspire national demonstrations, attract nationwide media attention, or spark national political debate. The Trayvon Martin case affected each of these. Why? What about the Trayvon Martin case set it apart from the others? We will briefly review the people involved and the facts of the case, discuss the outcome of the case, and explore the ways that the case has sparked action and debate on many different fronts.

Trayvon Martin Becomes a Household Name

The reason why the Trayvon Martin shooting captured national attention is a combination of the tragic and compelling nature of Trayvon Martin’s story, the dogged determination of Martin’s parents and their legal team to make sure their story was told, and the particular time and place in history in which it occurred. Trayvon Benjamin Martin was a seventeen-year-old African American high school student who lived in Miami and was visiting his father in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, while on suspension from school. At 6’3”, 140 pounds, he was athletic. He played

football, went horseback riding, snowboarded, and skied. As a typical teenager, he loved texting his friends; talking to his girlfriend; and listening to R&B, rap, and gospel music. Months before his death, he sat in the cockpit of a plane and began to dream. He dreamed that he would one day fly planes or become an aviation mechanic.⁵ Despite Trayvon's disciplinary problems in school, his parents believed he would find his way. They believed Trayvon's dreams would come true, and they supported him in every way possible. However, on February 26, 2012, his life and the dreams he and his family had for him came to a violent end.

On this very ordinary day, Trayvon Martin went to a convenience store and purchased a bag of Skittles and a bottle of iced tea. He began to walk home with the hood of his sweatshirt over his head. As he walked, the captain of the neighborhood watch, George Zimmerman, spotted him and thought Martin looked suspicious. It was raining, and Martin seemed to be looking around and walking slowly rather than walking quickly to his destination.⁶ At the time, Zimmer-

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man was a twenty-eight-year-old neighborhood watch captain and student at Seminole State College. Zimmerman is of Caucasian and Peruvian descent with many black family members.⁷ On February 26th, he called 911 to report that Martin looked suspicious. In the previous months, the perpetrators of burglaries in the area had been black males.⁸ Zimmerman was instructed

by the operator not to pursue Martin. He disregarded the instructions. Moments later neighbors reported hearing screams and a gun shot.⁹ Trayvon Martin lay dead. Zimmerman was taken into police custody and released after claiming he killed Martin in self-defense. According to Florida's Stand-Your-Ground law, residents of Florida can use deadly force without having to retreat from a situation in which they feel threatened. Zimmerman also had a conceal-and-carry permit for his gun.¹⁰

Dealing with the sudden death of their son was devastating for Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton. However, when the police released Zimmerman because he claimed self-defense, they were outraged. They wanted Zimmerman to be arrested, charged, and convicted for murder. They turned to Tracy Martin's sister-in-law, attorney Patricia Jones, for advice. Jones told Martin to contact Benjamin Crump, who had secured a \$7.2 million award while representing the family of a young man who died in a boot-camp-style football program in 2006.¹¹ Crump went to work, pro bono, and assembled a team to develop a media

strategy. Thanks to their efforts, the case received coverage by local media. However, when the team contacted national media, they were initially met with little interest. Their break came on March 7, 2012, when Reuters

published the first national story. On March 8, CBS News, *The Huffington Post*, the *Grio*, and NBC News also picked up the story.¹² Also on March 8, Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin started a petition on Change.org requesting that Angela Corey, Florida's fourth district state's attorney, investigate their son's murder and prosecute George Zimmerman for the shooting and killing

of their son. By March 20, the petition had collected more than 500,000 signatures.¹³

Reactions Reveal Racial Divides

Reactions to the Trayvon Martin case exposed the deep racial divides that still exist in the United States. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll, 91 percent of the African Americans and 59 percent of Hispanics polled believed that Martin was unjustly killed. However, only 35 percent of whites felt the same way.¹⁴ For African Americans in particular, Trayvon Martin's tragic story was an all-too-familiar one of racial profiling. Many African Americans can relate to being followed in stores and other public venues simply because of the color of their skin. African American men in particular are taught from a young age "the black male code."¹⁵ Part of the black male code is to realize that even though they may not be criminals, some people assume that all black men are criminals because of the clothes they wear or because of their race. African Americans understand that in the eyes of many, black men are problems in need of a solution. When they are in neighborhoods where some believe that they are not supposed to be, they must be stopped, interrogated, and guided to their rightful places.

Protests Emerge Nationally

So when African Americans heard that Martin was followed and ultimately killed for no other reason than he was black and wearing a hoodie, they, along with justice-seeking people of diverse races and ethnicities, hit the streets to protest. Weeks after the details of the case went public, Million Hoodie marches were organized around the country. At the marches, people of all ethnicities and hues held up signs that read "I am Trayvon Martin" to demonstrate solidarity and to advocate for justice. For many participants, these demonstrations were not just individual marches. They were part of a movement—a movement to agitate for justice for all victims of racism and racial profiling.¹⁶ Marches were

held in cities such as Sanford, Florida; Los Angeles, California; and New York, New York. The continuous national attention the case received in the news allowed other issues and concerns stemming from it to shape local, state, and national conversations and political debates.

The very organized and focused nature of the protests demonstrated the power of ordinary people to affect positive change in a democratic society. For example, on the local level, the Sanford police department was forced to release the 911 tapes for public hearing. Public pressure also forced the resignation of the police chief who released Zimmerman on the night of the shooting. On the state level, Governor Rick Scott was compelled to appoint a state attorney to look into the case. Zimmerman was later charged with second-degree murder. More than a year later, Zimmerman was found not guilty by a jury of his peers.

Social and Political Influence Ongoing

Some parents and guardians of African American males wonder whether their children are less safe after the George Zimmerman not-guilty verdict than they were before. Many have always taught their sons the black male code: 1. Some people perceive you as a threat because of your race and what you wear. 2. When confronted by someone with a badge or gun, do not flee, fight, or put your hands anywhere but up. 3. Go out of your way to show people the kind of man you really are.¹⁷ However, now, after a man was found not guilty of killing an innocent teenager—a teenager he pursued simply because he looked suspicious—what should they tell their sons? How are they to keep them safe? What advice should they give them?

The case continues to inspire social action by young people. While this article is being written, a group of Florida A & M University students called the Dream Defenders are refusing to leave the state capital building until Governor Rick Scott convenes a special legislative session to discuss the repeal of Florida's Stand-Your-Ground law. They

want to replace it with Trayvon's Law, which will encompass a set of policies that prohibit racial profiling and end the school-to-prison pipeline.¹⁸

In addition, the Trayvon Martin case highlights the need for conversation and action around the issue of white privilege. White privilege explains the discrepancies between the reaction of white people and African Americans to Trayvon Martin's death. Rather than attempting to be in solidarity with Martin by claiming to be Trayvon Martin, recently white people have been writing articles acknowledging that they are not now, nor could they ever be, Trayvon Martin.¹⁹ In these articles white people are admitting that they have never been followed simply because of the color of their skin or type of clothes they were wearing. They have never been dismissed or discriminated against because of the color of their skin. As white people, they can be more certain than African Americans that the justice system will work on their behalf rather than being stacked against them.²⁰ In these articles, writers are calling for systems of white privilege to be dismantled so that all people are treated equally.

The Martin case is an impetus for action and debate on racial profiling. For advocates of racial profiling, the Trayvon Martin case was a waste of time and effort. Since African American males had been the perpetrators of previous burglaries in the area, it makes sense that Zimmerman would have viewed Martin as suspicious.²¹ However, opponents of racial profiling highlight the limitations and unequal implementation of racial profiling laws.²² For example, if racial profiling were applied to every racial demographic in the United States, white men would have a hard time fully participating in public life. They would

undergo extra scrutiny when purchasing guns since they perpetrate most of the mass shootings.²³ They would be subjected to extra levels of security when applying for work in the banking/financial industry since they caused the housing crisis of 2007/2008.²⁴ They would have a hard time getting licenses to drive cars since the majority of drunk drivers are white males.²⁵ Racial profiling is dangerous. Innocent people often get harassed, injured, or even killed because they bear the same physical characteristics as someone who perpetrated a crime in the past. Thanks to the tremendous influence of the Trayvon Martin case, racial profiling practices are being reexamined.²⁶

The Martin case is also impacting the gun control debate. A few months after Martin's shooting and before Zimmerman's trial, the Aurora shooting occurred in Aurora Colorado, in which twelve people were killed and fifty-nine people were injured.²⁷ The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting occurred in December 2012, in which twenty children and six adults were killed.²⁸ Advocates of gun control laws that deny gun permits to perpetrators of domestic violence or people who have been arrested for violent offenses

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argue that had such laws been in place in Florida in 2010, George Zimmerman would not have been issued a conceal-and-carry permit. Trayvon Martin would still be alive.²⁹ Zimmerman had been arrested in the past for assaulting a police officer. He had also been issued a restraining order for domestic battery.³⁰

The Trayvon Martin shooting is a tragic event that senselessly took the life of a happy, vibrant, promising young man. Out of this tragedy has come deep soul searching and social action around issues of race, racism, and racial profiling on local, state, and national levels. Ordinary citizens are allowing their voices and opinions to be heard. Gun laws are being revisited for their effectiveness. While Trayvon Martin's death is a national tragedy, it also appears to be a catalyst for positive change. Let us continue to seize the moment.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe Trayvon Martin deserved to be followed? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. What is the role of a neighborhood watch? Did George Zimmerman fulfill or violate the expectations of his office?
3. Should people who have criminal backgrounds be allowed to purchase guns?
4. What are the pros and cons of Stand-Your-Ground laws?
5. Have you ever heard of “the black male code”? How does it make you feel about the black male experience in America? (i.e., Does its existence make you aware of an experience you never thought about before? Does it seem like a paranoid response? Does it make you want to learn more about the experiences of African American males with authority figures in the United States?)