

Trayvon Martin. A Modern American Lynching

Never Forget... and Never Forgive

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Global Research, March 27, 2012
revcom.us 27 March 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The February 26 murder of Trayvon Martin has ignited outrage around the country and reminded us once again of this cold hard fact of life in the USA.

That if you're Black, and especially if you're young, male, and perhaps wearing a hoodie—that at any time, on any street, you can be living one moment... then dead the next, from a modern day lynching. It can be from a cop. Or it might be from a vigilante wanna-be-cop. And even as you take your last breath, even before your parents are notified and the tears begin to fall, the whole system of police, laws, and courts will be working to render a verdict of "justifiable homicide."

By now, most everyone knows the basic facts: On February 26, 2012, in a small gated community in Sanford, Florida, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin went out to buy some snacks at the 7-Eleven. George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch captain, driving around in his SUV, called 911 to say he saw something "real suspicious." The 911 dispatcher told him not to do anything. But Zimmerman got out of his car. There was yelling, then a gunshot and Trayvon Martin's life was over.

Initial reports said that the police did not arrest Zimmerman citing Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law which can mean you only need your word to show you thought your life was in danger to establish self defense. Since this law has gone into effect the number of killings found to be justifiable homicide has jumped from an average of 12 to 33 per year. 20 other states have similar laws. This is nothing but a *legalized lynch law* and should be renamed the "Open Season on Black and Brown Men" Law.

The cops were in Zimmerman's corner, protecting him, from the very beginning—and treating Trayvon Martin like *he* was the criminal:

- The police didn't charge Zimmerman with anything, accepting his claim that he acted in self-defense... even though Zimmerman had a gun and Trayvon Martin was "armed" with Skittles and an iced-tea; even though Zimmerman weighs 250 pounds and Trayvon Martin weighed 140 pounds.
- The police told Trayvon's father one reason Zimmerman wasn't arrested was because they respected his education background in criminal justice and he had a "squeaky clean" record...
- The police *corrected* a witness who said she heard a very young voice cry for help, telling her to say she heard Zimmerman call for help... even though three witnesses said they heard the "desperate wail of a child, a gunshot, and then silence." (*Miami Herald*)

- The police did a background check on Trayvon Martin *as he lay dead*, but not on Zimmerman, *the murderer*. They tested Trayvon Martin's blood for alcohol and drugs but not Zimmerman's.
- The police didn't even talk to Trayvon Martin's girlfriend, who had been on the phone with him before and during part of the attack.

In fact, the Sanford police have a history of protecting those who brutalize and murder Black people. In 2005, two security guards, one the son of a Sanford police officer and the other a department volunteer, killed a Black man they claimed was trying to run them over. The guards were eventually acquitted. And the officer in charge of that case was the same one in charge at the scene of the Trayvon Martin murder. In 2010, police waited seven weeks to arrest a lieutenant's son who was caught on video punching a homeless Black man.

"We Are All Trayvon Martin"

The murder of Trayvon Martin has touched the hearts of many millions around the country. And more than this—it has connected with the real life experience and anger of millions of Black and Latino youth and their families who know... *that could have been me... that could have been my son... that could have been my brother... that could have been my friend*. And ghastly ghosts of America's past are being evoked: the KKK, the lynching tree, the white racists who murdered 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955.

Mothers are speaking out, with bitterness, about how they school their sons, from the time they are very young, about the "rules" they must follow if they are to stay alive, like: "always have your driver's license, wearing a suit is safer than wearing casual clothes, don't run down a street, never run from police."

Protests are continuing and growing—all around the country, in large cities and small towns, with many thousands of people calling for justice. People of all different nationalities are demonstrating, wearing hoodies, Skittles in hand, carrying signs that say, "We are all Trayvon Martin." Students in more than 30 Miami schools walked out of class. Relatives of those killed by the police are speaking out. At a Chicago rally, members of Emmett Till's family read a statement they had written to the family of Trayvon Martin. Students at colleges around the country are protesting. Celebrities are speaking out and the NBA Players Union issued a statement with condolences to the Martin family and calling for Zimmerman's arrest.

For decades now, through the so-called "war on drugs" and mass incarceration, a whole class of people, especially Black and Latino youth, have been stigmatized and criminalized. Even as they are brutalized and gunned down by the police, warehoused in prisons and tortured in solitary confinement—the system and its ideological mouthpieces like Bill Cosby demonize the youth, telling them—and society at large—that it's their own fault for what is happening to them, and this is what they deserve.

The murder of Trayvon Martin has put something *that happens every day* in communities across this country into the national spotlight. Millions of Black and Latino people live with this kind of terror—never knowing if walking down the street with (or without) a hoodie, eating (or not eating) Skittles—will be the last act of their life because some racist vigilante, or some actual cop decides that because you're Black, and especially if you're young, that you're too "suspicious" to be allowed to keep on living. But this reality is something that's

not only been covered over, but in many ways been viciously turned upside down and back around to point the blame *back* on the victims, saying the youth themselves are the cause. “You shouldn’t be wearing them clothes.” “You shouldn’t be hanging out.” “You shouldn’t be in that part of town.”

But with the murder of Trayvon Martin the anger at the great suffering that maybe just seethes below has burst out and is saying ENOUGH—“*We are sick and tired of burying our children!*” “*We are sick and tired of being demeaned and demonized.*” “*We demand to be treated like human beings!* And this has delivered a jolt to the “normalness” of all this, where it can seem like things will never change, that things *can* never change.

The reality of “We are All Trayvon Martin” is being manifested by people of all nationalities coming together into the streets to resist something which in so many other cases people accept, or fight alone. And in all this people are not only raising their heads, but questioning *why* do things have to be this way.

Now, in this moment, people more broadly—including some who have been sucked in by the hype demonizing Black youth—are seeing the real truth of the matter and being challenged to take a stand against the murder of Trayvon Martin. And this is giving more space to the people to stand up, speak out, and fight, with right clearly on their side. This is a moment when, the legitimacy of the established order, of this system, can begin to be called into question for many people.

Sanford, Anytown, USA

By 1900 the town that’s now Sanford had become an active Black community and was actually the second town in Florida to be incorporated by African Americans. Then in 1911 white people took it over and one of the first things they did was to rename the streets that had been named after its Black pioneers. In 1945 Jackie Robinson traveled to Florida with the Brooklyn Dodgers. A “large group of white residents” confronted the mayor of Sanford and “demanded that Robinson...be run out of town.” (Dave Zirin, *The Nation*, March 23, 2012)

Ulysees Cunningham, an 80-year-old Black retired contractor, has lived in Sanford for most of his life, and remembers decades ago when Black diners walked into restaurants and were seated apart from whites. Now, he says, he watches police cars cruise through his neighborhood off Celery Avenue all night, “even though nothing was going on.”

But this isn’t just Sanford’s history and this isn’t just Sanford’s present. This isn’t some aberration, some pockmark on a “healing America,” a “post-racial America.” No! This has happened, this is what’s happening, in cities and towns from coast to coast.

The Ordinarity of the Oppression of Black People in the USA

“It’s surprising. It’s shocking,” said Tracy Martin, Trayvon’s father. “It lets me know that justice is just not being served here. All we want is justice for our son. We’re not asking for anything out of the ordinary.”

Yes, Tracy Martin is right. Justice is NOT being served. But the fact is—the murder of Trayvon Martin... all *this* is NOT out of the ordinary in the United States of America.

It is good that people are demanding JUSTICE. And at the same time, we need to be clear on

what kind of *system* is responsible for creating people like George Zimmerman, what kind of *system* is behind all the circumstances surrounding and leading up to the murder of Trayvon Martin.

We need to ask: What is the system that created the whole situation surrounding the murder of Trayvon Martin—and then the whole way the vigilante murderer has been allowed to go free? There is a long history to the current situation in cities and towns throughout the United States, where a whole culture of white supremacy lays over every aspect of economic and social life. This is not the beginning of the story—there is a whole history to this. There is a whole history and present day reality of the oppression of Black people in this country that not only helps us understand the murder of Trayvon Martin—but tells us what is required to put an end to what caused such outrages to happen over and over again.

Slavery, lynch mobs, racist vigilantes, police terror. These are all expression of a long and ongoing history and structure of the oppression of Black people.

All this is part of what this whole country has been and will continue to be—until it is swept away through revolution when the time is ripe and replaced by a whole new, liberating society.

What happened the night of February 26 in Sanford, Florida IS a modern day lynching, bearing the marks of the history and present day reality of a system where the oppression of Black people is built into its very foundations. And *this*, we must never forget and never forgive about the death of Trayvon Martin.

We need to Fight the Power, and Transform the People, for Revolution. It is a really great and powerful thing that the masses are standing up, resisting, and demanding justice in the face of the outrageous murder of Trayvon Martin. This struggle must not only continue, it must go further. And it must not get derailed and channeled into the “safe” and ineffective workings of the system itself—where the people end up trusting the fox to protect the chicken coop. We need to wage a determined fight, to demand justice, to demand the truth—to get at the root causes of all this and the revolutionary solution.

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