

Profiling Blacks: From Rodney King to Trayvon Martin

Written by Sylvester Monroe, Special to the NNPA News Service from America's Wire
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LOS ANGELES (NNPA) —Rodney Glen King's apparent accidental death at age 47 has prompted a flood of media punditry about the legacy of a life rife with misfortune. It was young Glen, as he was called, who had discovered his father's body in the family bathtub. Rodney Sr. reportedly drank himself to death when Rodney Jr. was in high school.

Pictured: Tracy Martin (left) and Sybrina Fulton, the parents of slain Florida teenager Trayvon Martin, address the media during the National Action Network Convention (April 11, 2012).

Following his father's penchant for alcohol, the younger King made a fateful wrong turn at age 25—drinking and driving, and leading Los Angeles police officers on a high-speed chase that thrust him into an ill-fitting celebrity he never wanted or wore very well.

King's brutal videotaped beating seen around the world years before the advent of YouTube changed the course of his life. It also triggered events that altered how law enforcement and government officials handle complaints of excessive force and police brutality. The initial impact of the beating in March 1991 was to shine light on a dark realm of routine police misconduct in Los Angeles and other cities.

Six days of deadly rioting followed acquittals more than a year later on April 29 of the officers

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who beat King and led to sweeping reforms of the police department. A heralded commitment to community policing, increased civilian oversight and more enlightened department leadership, including appointment of two Black police chiefs, significantly cooled longstanding tinderbox relations between police and the African-American community.

Less successful in Los Angeles and other cities nationwide has been elimination of the gross stereotyping, or profiling, of young Blacks as dangerous, drunk, drug-crazed ogres who can be controlled only with extreme force.

Twenty years after the Los Angeles rioting, national attention is again focused on a racially-charged assault. This time, an overzealous community watch volunteer in Sanford, Fla., is charged in the shooting death of an unarmed Black teenager, and initial police handling of the case has raised widespread concern.

The King and Martin cases are markedly different in detail, especially in that Sanford police had nothing to do with Martin's death. But unchanged in two decades is continued use of excessive force by law enforcement officers and others who seek, out of fear, to justify violent and often fatal encounters with black youths and men.

Such professed fear has been a major dynamic in practically every questionable case of excessive police force against young Blacks since the Watts riots of 1965 in Los Angeles. That fear factor played a key role in the King trial defense and in another verdict shortly before the city exploded in anger and violence in April 1992.

The shocking acquittals of the police officers in the King trial came less than two weeks before Soon Ja Du, 51, a Korean store owner, received a 10-year suspended prison term, probation, a fine and community service for the shooting death of Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old African-American. Du said Harlins was stealing a bottle of orange juice and shot her in the back of the head. The incident was videotaped.

Nine years later, in April 2001, rioting was sparked in Cincinnati when a police officer fatally shot Timothy Thomas, a 19-year-old Black. Five months later, the officer was acquitted.

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Like Trayvon Martin, Thomas was unarmed. He was shot while running away from the officer, who was trying to arrest him. Officers in the King beating mounted much of their defense for striking King more than 50 times by saying that the 6-foot-4 King, who weighed more than 200 pounds, refused to obey commands to stay on the ground, and that they feared for their safety.

This week, attorneys for George Zimmerman, the White Hispanic neighborhood watch volunteer charged with second-degree murder in Martin's death, released a police video in which he reenacted what he says happened during the fatal encounter. Zimmerman says he feared for his life after Martin reached for

Zimmerman's gun, and told him, "You're going to die."

According to Zimmerman, he shot Martin in self-defense under Florida's controversial "stand your ground" law that gives citizens the right to use deadly force if they fear for their lives.

Martin's parents contend that Zimmerman was the aggressor and pursued their unarmed son, who was walking home from a convenience store through the gated Sanford community that Zimmerman patrolled. They say Zimmerman racially profiled the teenager, followed and confronted him despite being told not to by a 911 operator whom Zimmerman called to report a suspicious Black man.

Before and after the King beating, there have been numerous incidents of excessive police force against Black men by police officers and others who invoked versions of the fear-factor defense. As recently as 2009, a grisly police assault was captured on videotape in Oakland, Calif. A transit police officer shot and killed Oscar Grant, 22, an unarmed Black shown lying on a train platform at the officer's feet. The officer was convicted of involuntary manslaughter but acquitted of second-degree murder and voluntary manslaughter.

Ironically, on the day Rodney King died, Black and Latino community leaders gathered at a rally

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in New York City to protest the city's stop-and-frisk policy that they say has led to escalated profiling of young Blacks and Latinos, and increasing allegations of excessive force and brutality by New York police officers.

The rally followed a report this year by the New York Civil Liberties Union showing that the New York City Police Department conducted 685,724 stop-and-frisk searches in 2011. More than 86 percent of those targeted by police were Blacks and Latinos.

"What happened to me and what's happened to others can still happen," King said in an interview with Ebony magazine in April, shortly before the 20th anniversary of the rioting. "The police are still killing people. I am just glad I was one of those who the camera was on."

King often said he wanted his epitaph to read: "Can we all just get along?" Nervous and visibly shaken, he spoke those words at a 1992 news conference immediately after rioting erupted.

The answer to his question may well be influenced by the outcome of the expected trial in the Martin shooting. This time, it is not a police officer but a private citizen who took it on himself to patrol the streets to protect his community from what he viewed as potentially dangerous intruders.

How the Sanford Police Department handled that shooting will be as important as actual facts of the case and a verdict. In the King case and others, Blacks felt that their voices and concerns about police misconduct went largely unheeded. When the officers were acquitted even though the videotape clearly seemed to show excessive force, Blacks in Los Angeles took it as one more slap in the face.

Similarly, the Martin family and African-Americans across the nation were outraged that Zimmerman was not arrested immediately and charged. When city officials rejected Police Chief

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Bill Lee's offer to resign, the situation was aggravated. Lee, who had stepped aside temporarily in May and was on paid leave, was fired on June 20.

Whatever the outcome, if Sanford's Black community and African-Americans elsewhere do not believe that the investigation and expected trial were conducted fairly and that Black profiling has been addressed adequately, the answer to Rodney King's plaintive plea will undoubtedly be, "Not yet."

Whether Trayvon Martin will become the Rodney King of his generation remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: The ghost of Rodney King will loom large over the trial of George Zimmerman.

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