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The 1.5 Million Man March

By John Feffer

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There are several types of missing persons.

Some missing people are missed so publicly that their absence is a presence. Vanished children reappeared on milk cartons and then later in amber alerts. American soldiers, killed in action or MIA, look out at us from rows of photos like headstones in the newspaper on Memorial Day. Mothers assembled with signs and photos in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires in the 1970s to demand information about their children who'd disappeared during Argentina's "dirty war."

Then there are the missing that don't exist at all.

Rather, they *should* exist — for instance, the missing girls of Asia. Because of declining fertility, prenatal screening, and a cultural preference for boy babies, families in China, Taiwan, Korea, India, and a few places outside Asia (such as the Balkans and the Caucasus) have altered the natural biological balance of about 105 male babies to 100 female babies. This disparity has been most prominent in China, where the ratio today is 123 boy babies to 100 girl babies. As a result of this selective breeding, Asia as a whole is missing upwards of 163 million women.

The case of the girls-that-should-be came to light in the 1980s and generated a new term: *gendercide*.

This gender imbalance, according to several popular theories, will tilt China in a radically different direction. A 1-percent increase in the ratio in favor of boys, argue researchers Jane Golley and Rod Tyers, yields a 5-percent increase in the crime rate. That doesn't speak highly of the social usefulness of testosterone, but it may help to explain the explosion of crime and unrest in China.

An entire book has been devoted to the likelihood that all these "bare branches," as young unmarried Chinese men are known, will push the country into waging war on its neighbors. My guess is that these single men will more likely channel their sex drive into making money, playing computer games, and (as is happening so frequently in South Korea) marrying women from other lands.

Whatever the consequences of China's gender imbalance, the point is: the missing will make their mark.

In a third category are the absent who certainly exist, but given how little public attention they receive, they're like the proverbial trees falling in an unpopulated forest. Into this category are the nameless political prisoners who languish in labor camps in North Korea and elsewhere, the people who try to cross borders but end up as skeletons in the Arizona desert or bodies washed up on the Mediterranean coastline, and the "untouchables" who occupy such a low caste in society that they are practically invisible.

And then there are the missing African-American men.

The 1.5 Million Man March

America is a land of enclaves. The rich cluster, and so do the poor, and this segregation has only intensified over the last two decades. Race plays a role in this, as it does in everything in America.

These maps of major American cities demonstrate just how racially segregated our residential lives remain, from the 8 Mile Road that sharply divides whites and blacks in Detroit to the clear racial separation between north and south St. Louis. Barack Obama notwithstanding, racism is real. Check out the Brave New Films video that portrays the differing responses to nearly identical resumes, constituent letters, and so on submitted by whites and African Americans.

But one of the most remarkable symbols of racial discrimination are the missing African-American men. According to an analysis last month in *The New York Times*, 1.5 million African American men have gone missing in this country.

You won't see them on the side of milk cartons or arrayed in an honorable display in the newspaper. These men are missing because, for the most part, they've died young or they're in prison. They are mourned and missed by their families and friends, and their absence is certainly a presence in predominantly African-American communities. This gender imbalance is also a topic in *Essence* and on the blogs. But it comes up more in dating forums than in the kind of public policy quarters that have devoted so much attention to Asia's missing girls.

To be blunt, this problem is less about love and more about war.

To understand the anger in the African-American community in the United States — which has exploded in Ferguson, Baltimore, and other places — it's important to understand the war that's taking place across the country. The victims of this war are young black men, some of them involved in drugs and gangs, some shot as innocent bystanders, others killed by the police. Homicide is the leading cause of death for young men between the ages of 25 and 54. Many others have been taken prisoner, locked away for decades on drug charges because of mandatory sentencing.

“More than one out of every six black men who today should be between 25 and 54 years old have disappeared from daily life,” *The New York Times* reports. This gender gap doesn't exist among babies and little children. It only begins to appear in the teenage years.

Where is this gap most prevalent? At the top of the list in terms of percentages is Ferguson, Missouri. In terms of sheer numbers, New York is number one and Baltimore comes in sixth. In places where black male lives seem to matter so little, it's no surprise that the African-American community reacts so strongly to the kind of policing that reduces those numbers even further.

The Compensation Effect

What makes the absence of African-American men so glaring on the ground is their total lack of absence in other fields of public life in the United States.

Black men dominate the music charts, grace both the silver screen and the small screen, lead most of the sporting leagues, and, yes, occupy the White House. WEB DuBois once spoke of the “talented tenth” of African Americans who would excel in various professions if loosed from the shackles of racism. In our age of growing polarity, only the talented hundredth (or thousandth) has scaled the heights of fame.

But that's what makes the MAAM (Missing African-American Men) phenomenon so troubling. White America appears to be inundated with black men, but it's just an appearance, a hall of mirrors. Barack Obama and Samuel R. Jackson and Chris Rock and Kobe Bryant and Kanye West — and now Ben Carson — are reflected in the media so many times that we have the illusion that there are more African Americans in public than there really are.

White people don't grapple with the MAAM problem because not that many African Americans live in their enclaves to begin with. On top of that, the visibility of famous black men sends a soothing signal that race is no longer an issue in post-racial America.

It's also a question of numbers. Sure, 1.5 million people sounds like a lot, but it's less than 1 percent of the population. Similarly, we expect average North Koreans and Chinese to be in a constant state of outrage over their political prisoners, but those unfortunates too represent a very small fraction of the population. In Shirley Jackson's famous short story “The Lottery,” the community sacrifices one person annually to maintain its cohesion and stability. In our day, we

only stone a couple people every year (there were 35 executions in the United States in 2014). Jail is second “prize” in our modern lottery.

The United States continues to have the largest prison population on the planet. The total number of people who are missing from society is, again, around 1.5 million (though the number rises when you include people cycling through county jails). The gender breakdown: 93 percent male.

China has yet to figure out what to do with its bare branches. The United States is dealing with all the testosterone by bottling it up — in jail.

But remember, the missing will always make their mark.