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The Tragedy of America's First Black President Racial Divide

By Markus Feldenkirchen and Holger Stark

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Police killings of black youth in Ferguson and Cleveland have outraged many in the US. The tragic events show how deep the societal divide remains between blacks and whites. Many have given up hope that President Obama can change anything.

On the evening after the city burned, a man in a black leather jacket and white clerical collar is standing on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. He shakes his head and looks as though he is fighting back tears. Once again, young black men and women are standing across from older, slightly pudgy white policemen in front of the local station. They look like armies, like they are at war.

"It won't ever stop," says the man, a black pastor named Alvin Herring. He has been accompanying the protests since the beginning of August, ever since white police officer Darren Wilson shot an unarmed, 18-year-old black man named Michael Brown. "A deep, festering wound has opened up in the heart of American culture and society," Herring says.

The systematic racism that these young people are confronted with each day has made them deeply angry, Henning continues. "It is impossible for them to feel loved, or even respected. They no longer believe they are needed or that their lives are worth anything."

At exactly this moment, eight police officers rush over to a black man and pull him out of a group, accusing him of throwing an empty plastic bottle. They jump on top of him, press his cheek to the asphalt and handcuff him with zip ties before dragging him into the station.

Ever since the protests began all those months ago, Pastor Alvin Herring has hoped that Barack Obama, the country's first black president, would visit Ferguson. Henning says Obama could have sent a powerful message that he understood the frustrations of young black people by making the trip.

High Hopes Dashed

On this evening, one which would see this town north of St. Louis sink into violence yet again, Herring misses Obama particularly acutely. "The president is much too careful, much too hesitant," he says. "The president should be here in Ferguson tonight. He should demonstrate more commitment."

Herring is merely putting into words what many African Americans think about their president -- and not just since the predominantly white grand jury that decided against prosecuting the policeman who shot Michael Brown. And not just since the jury's decision propelled thousands of black people to take to the streets of 170 US cities in protest.

The black population of America had high hopes for "their" president. They had the feeling, when they cast their ballots in 2008 and 2012, that something momentous was taking place. Never before had so many blacks voted as in those two elections. When one of ours ends up in the White House, they seemed to hope, then things will finally improve for us as well.

In March 2008, when Barack Obama, then a candidate for president, gave his big speech on racism, he sounded like the one who could unite the country. But in November of this year, Obama is -- contrary to his intentions -- the president of a country that is more divided than ever before. And one of the deepest divisions runs between blacks and whites.

That is the real tragedy of America's first African-American president.

When Obama delivered a statement last Monday evening at the White House about the grand jury decision, he seemed more helpless than at almost any other time during his presidency. Even as he called on blacks in Ferguson to remain calm and peaceful, the first shops were being looted and set on fire. His comments seemed strangely uninspired and apprehensive -- as though he had already succumbed to resignation.

Many of the causes of the day-to-day discrimination experienced by blacks, of course, are far outside of Obama's control. Federalism in America means that he has little influence over the behavior of local police or over the judiciaries in individual states. In such areas, Obama can only resort to appeals -- something that many blacks believe he has done too little of. From the perspective of the White House, however, such speeches are often counterproductive.

Less Money, Less Education, Less Influence

"Ferguson marks the end of the Obama era," says Cornel West, professor emeritus at Princeton University and a leading African American intellectual. It is "a very sad ending," West says. "We began with immense hopes and we are ending with deep disappointment." Obama, he says, did nothing to fix a justice system that denies any form of fairness to young people with black or brown skin. He adds that the president shares some of the blame for the "race and class warfare" that is being waged against black people.

The shots fired in Ferguson have become a danger for societal peace in a country that once celebrated itself for being a cultural melting pot -- a mixture which whites in America decreasingly see themselves as being a part of. Instead, the US is a divided land with a primarily white elite and an African-American population that tends to have less money, less education and less influence. In many areas, blacks are also now being overtaken by the growing Hispanic population.

To be sure, the US has plenty of black pop stars, black sports icons and, since 2009, even a black president. Nevertheless, most people with dark skin are far away from enjoying true equality. Fifty years after the widespread reforms pushed through by President Lyndon B. Johnson, which established formal equality for blacks, the social gap remains glaring.

Institutional Racism

Making matters worse is the discrimination practiced by state institutions such as law enforcement. The chances that a young black man will be shot dead by the police, for example, is 21 times greater than it is for young white males. The death of 18-year-old Michael Brown is far from abnormal. Just 10 days ago, a 12-year-old boy was shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland because he was playing with a toy pistol at a playground.

The country-wide protests of the African-American minority demonstrate just how deep the distrust between blacks and whites remains despite the 51 years that have passed since Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Many white police officers see young black men primarily as a danger to public safety that must be stopped, with a firearm if necessary. In the eyes of many blacks, by contrast, white police officers like Darren Wilson are nothing more than racist murderers.

When the grand jury last Monday decided not to press charges against the 28-year-old Wilson, many African-Americans saw it as proof that they could not expect justice from the state and its judiciary. The case was led by a white public prosecutor who has a reputation for defending police at all costs. Instead of being professionally cross-examined, Wilson was allowed to spend four hours telling his version of the story. If the goal was to definitively destroy the last vestiges of faith blacks may have had in the justice system, the grand jury in the Brown case did excellent work.

On the evening after the grand jury decision was announced, more than a dozen shops in Ferguson were set on fire, with over 1,000 blacks engaging in street battles with the police. The scenes were repeated on subsequent evenings. Last Tuesday, South Florissant Road was the

dividing line, symbolic of a line -- sometimes clearly visible, other times hidden -- that runs through all of America.

On the one side of the street, both in front of and behind a fence surrounding the police station, are police and National Guard troops, almost all of them white. They are outfitted with riot shields, batons and all manner of firearms, looking not unlike an army preparing to defend Ferguson from the Taliban. The governor of Missouri has ordered 2,100 National Guard troops to St. Louis for the evening.

On the other side of South Florissant Road are the young blacks of Ferguson. They hold signs up reading "Black Lives Matter" and "No Justice, No Peace." Few of them are over 30 years of age.

Their expressions reveal hate and the word "fuck" is everywhere, in combination with words such as police, system, judiciary, government and power. In August, such faces looked different: distraught but also full of hope that something good might come out of Michael Brown's death. There was hope that change might be on the way.

'If We Don't Destroy ... They Won't Pay Attention'

One of the demonstrators on this Tuesday evening is wearing a scarf pulled up over his nose with his cap pulled down low. He is stomping on the asphalt and yelling, "They order us around and kill us like we were dogs!" The 25-year-old asks to be quoted as "Mike Monster," saying he wants to remain anonymous because he has decided this evening to turn his back on the system of rules and laws that he no longer identifies with. In August, he says, he demonstrated peacefully. But now he is ready for violence. "If we don't tear anything down, if we don't destroy anything, if we don't set fire to anything, they won't even pay attention," he yells. "We need a revolution!"

"You can't stop the revolution," the crowd around him replies.

A quote from Thomas Jefferson is scratched into the asphalt in front of the South Florissant police station: "When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty." It is a slogan that many in Ferguson have taken to heart.

Marley's Bar & Grill, the only restaurant in the area that has remained open despite the protests, is just 500 meters away from the police station, but it is a totally different world. All 15 people sitting at the counter are white. Three of the televisions inside are showing ice hockey, while just one is tuned to CNN. Suddenly, "Breaking News" begins flashing on the screen: "Police car attacked in Ferguson."

Voices become raised at the counter. "They are crazy. They need to finally learn how to behave," one woman shrieks. "Like animals," her partner adds.

In the history of America, violence has occasionally paved the way for political improvements for the country's black population. When the escaped slave Shadrach Minkins was captured in

Boston in 1851 under the Fugitive Slave Act, for example, slavery opponents stormed the courthouse, assaulted the court marshals and freed Minkins. The incident marked the beginning of a shift in attitudes toward slavery.

Yet peaceful movements, and the courts, have also played a role. Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of a public bus on Dec. 1, 1955 -- which led to a Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public transport was unconstitutional -- is just one example. But it was the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. that achieved perhaps the greatest victory for racial equality in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, using peaceful protests and civil disobedience. Even so, there was a threat of violence in the background, in the form of Malcolm X and his followers.

Little Change under Obama

At the beginning of his term, Barack Obama likely never imagined that a new wave of violence would take place during his presidency. But it is not an accident. After all, he himself raised hopes that progress would be made. Yet after six years in office, little has changed for blacks in the US.

Obama held the speech that raised the hopes of black Americans on March 18, 2008 as a candidate in Philadelphia. It was a reaction to comments made by his Chicago pastor and friend Jeremiah Wright, who had accused the US government of crimes against blacks. "God damn America ... for killing innocent people," he intoned from the pulpit in a sermon that threatened to derail Obama's candidacy.

"The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society," Obama said in his speech. "It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country ... is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past."

Obama was referring to a time when blacks were forced to serve whites as slaves; a time when they weren't even second-class citizens, instead being treated as commodities to be raised and sold at market. But he also was referring to the decades leading up to the 1960s when blacks were not allowed to use the same park benches as whites and were forced to sit at the back of the bus.

In that speech, Obama promised to create "a more perfect union," in reference to the preamble of the US Constitution. He sought to finally fulfill the promise made 50 years earlier by fellow Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson. In remarks at the signing of the Civil Rights Bill on July 2, 1964, Johnson said he hoped to "eliminate the last vestiges of injustice in our beloved country" and to "close the springs of racial poison."

Many observers believe that Obama's speech was a decisive factor in his becoming the first black president in American history half a year later. It is still widely considered to be one of his best.

But the final push to realize Johnson's dream has still not taken place. The situation today gives the impression that African-Americans are adequately represented "without giving them the

possibility to really take advantage" of that representation, says Kareem Crayton, a law professor at the University of North Carolina. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, sociology professor at Duke University, agrees. "Having a black president doesn't mean much in our day-to-day lives."

King's 'Island of Poverty' Still Exists Today

Six years after Obama's race speech, more than a quarter of blacks in American live below the poverty line. Among whites, that figure is 12.8 percent. According to the Pew Research Center, the median annual income of a white household was about \$27,000 higher than that of a black household in 2011, with the difference having grown over the course of the last several decades. The black "island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity," which Martin Luther King complained about 50 years ago, still exists in 2014. Every third African-American child born between 1985 and 2000 grew up in a neighborhood marked by extreme poverty.

"Today, racial segregation can be seen in social mobility," argues Richard Reeves from the Washington think tank Brookings Institution. Last year, the US Education Department released a study that analyzed data from 97,000 schools across the country. According to its results, black students were suspended and expelled at three times the rate of their white peers. Every fourth school with a high proportion of blacks and Latinos did not offer advanced courses in mathematics.

"It's the age of Obama, and yet civil rights have gone backwards. What went wrong? asked the *New Republic* on its cover in August. The issue, which appeared after Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, spoke of a "new racism." Indeed, the kinds of deadly events that took place in Ferguson and Cleveland have now convinced many blacks that it wasn't Obama who was right back in the spring of 2008. Rather, it was his angry pastor, Jeremiah Wright.

On the Saturday before last, 12-year-old Tamir Rice wandered into Cudell Park at 3:12 p.m. The park is in a section of western Cleveland that is poor and primarily black. Paint flakes off the homes in the area, empty lots are overgrown and shops are secured with heavy padlocks. Tamir was black, and he was carrying a toy pistol. The combination was akin to a death sentence.

Tamir lived across the street in a grim brick building, his mother, the single parent of four children, unable to afford a better apartment. In the park, a bored Tamir wandered back and forth, throwing snow. He was carrying the plastic pistol in his right hand when a passerby saw him and called 911.

'Is He Black or Is He White?'

"There's a guy here with a pistol ... and he's like pointing it at everybody," the caller says. He's "probably a juvenile," the caller continues, adding that the pistol is "probably fake," a suspicion the caller later repeats. The officer taking the call wants to know what the person with the pistol looks like, asking "Is he black or white." She repeats the question three times.

The dispatcher alerted Timothy Loehmann, 26, and Frank Garmback, 46, who were in a patrol car in the area, notifying them of a black male with a firearm. The officers were not told of the possibility that the firearm was a toy.

At 3:30 p.m., the police car flew across the grass at high speed toward where the boy was playing. Tamir comes toward the car as it screeches to a halt, as though he is curious. The surveillance video of the shooting shows that he had stuffed the pistol under his jacket.

Loehmann jumps out of the passenger door and, according to the two officers, yelled "hands up!" three times. It isn't clear from the surveillance video of a nearby youth center how, exactly, Tamir responded. The police say he didn't put his hands up, grabbing instead toward his belt.

One shot hit Tamir in the breast and he collapsed. Between the arrival of the patrol car and the firing of the deadly shots, only seconds had elapsed.

The police officers could have carefully approached the boy, or they could have asked social workers at the youth club, who knew Tamir, to speak with him. But instead, they simply opened fire. Tamir Rice, who dreamed of one day becoming a professional basketball player, died in the hospital.

The American problem has many different facets, but it is accurate to say that it is mostly white men who shoot young African-Americans in the service of the state. The actor Morgan Freeman recently told German newsmagazine *Stern* that the color of the law is white.

Almost half of all murder victims and about 40 percent of the US prison population are black, even though the African-American share of the population is just 12.6 percent. And in many states, those with a criminal record forfeit many rights, such as access to welfare, for example. In 10 states, those who have been convicted of a criminal offense lose their right to vote for life.

'You Kill Our Children'

Since that deadly Saturday in Cudell Park, Cleveland Police Chief Calvin Williams has tried several times to explain why the officers opened fire on Tamir Rice. Williams, who is black himself, is standing in the gymnasium of the Cudell Park recreation center, a radio dangling from his lapel and a firearm affixed to his belt. Williams has come to answer questions -- and to try and calm local nerves. Three hundred people have crammed into the hall to hear him speak.

"Our officers are trained to take someone out if he is carrying a weapon," Williams says. "Shooting someone in the arm or in the leg may happen in the movies, but it doesn't happen in real life." In a society with as many firearms as citizens, it seems the police feel like they're in a constant state of war. Police deal every day with people potentially carrying firearms, and that's how they approach every call.

Calista Cottingham, 37, is also at the Cudell Park Recreation Center, and she wants to share her story. She has six children, including four sons. One day, she says, she drove one of her sons to football practice. Cottingham says she took him to the playing field and left the other children in

a parked car, an act that is illegal in some US states. She was then confronted by two police officers who ordered her to put her hands on the steering wheel and not move. When Cottingham told the officers she hadn't done anything wrong -- given that her oldest son had been sitting in the car -- she claims the police threatened her with a Taser. When she got out of the car, she says one of the policeman hit her so hard she had to be taken to the hospital.

Robin Andrews has also shown up at the recreation center this evening. She happens to be Tamir's aunt. "You guys are trained not to trust us," she says, with her comments directed at the police chief. "You kill our children and your behavior makes us sick." Andrews later explains that her own son wants to go on to study medicine, but each day she fears for his life. "The man who murdered my nephew needs to go to prison," Andrews says. "No justice, no peace." The sentence has become the slogan of these protests, one that can be heard in this recreation center in Cleveland, in Ferguson and on the streets of Washington, DC and New York.

Barack Obama has heard the rallying cry, which protestors have also been chanting during the past week in front of the White House. But the president is in a Catch 22 situation. On the one side he knows African-Americans have great expectations for him. On the other, he's prone to attacks every time he speaks out on the issue of race-linked incidents.

White Conservatives View Obama as Threat

Since Obama became president, opinions have become sharply divided within the American population when it comes to events with potentially racist backgrounds. More than two-thirds of Democrats disapproved of the acquittal of neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, who shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager, in Florida in February 2012. But only 20 percent of people identifying as Republicans had a problem with the verdict. And whereas more than half of Democrats surveyed said they thought the anti-slavery film "12 Years a Slave" was worthy of an Oscar, only 15 percent of Republicans thought it deserving of the award.

During Obama's time in office, Republicans have increasingly become a party of the white elite and rural regions. The party's most radical supporters viewed Obama's speeches and proposed legislation as nothing more than a black man's attempt to exact revenge against the country's white majority. Even if they don't always say so, Obama's opponents have always felt that his actions represent a threat to white people, whether he launched a federal investment programs aimed at economic stimulus or proposed making the healthcare system a little fairer.

Some white conservatives actually still believe today that they are discriminated against due to the color of their skin because African-Americans, on average, profit more from Obama's healthcare reforms. The extreme resistance to "Obamacare" wasn't motivated by economic concerns alone.

Some of his detractors even believe that Obama is seeking not only to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, but also from whites to blacks. That helps to explain some of the vehemence behind their attacks.

Obama actually has sought to help the bottom third of American society with his social and economic reforms. "The plain fact is there are some Americans who, in the aggregate, are consistently doing worse in our society," he said in February as he announced a \$200 million program to improve education for African-American and Hispanic boys. "And by almost every measure, the group that is facing some of the most severe challenges in the 21st century in this country are boys and young men of color," he said.

Backlash against Obama

His fight to establish a higher minimum wage is likewise one of the projects that the Republicans have fought with the same kind of fervor evident in their battle against healthcare reform. Obama signed an executive order to raise the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10 for people working on new federal service contracts, but he failed to get an increase in the national minimum wage through the Republicans in Congress, who view themselves as the defenders of the white middle and upper classes.

At the same time, it is also true that Obama has never really presented himself as an advocate of African-Americans during his time in office. He learned during a very early stage of his presidency the kind of fury he might unleash if he commented on conflicts with a racial element.

When the president said police "acted stupidly" when they arrested black Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates in 2009, he faced fierce criticism from his white opponents. Police had accused the professor of trying to break into his own home because his key had gotten stuck in the lock. Obama felt compelled in the end to convene a reconciliatory "beer summit" at the White House to which he invited both Gates and the police officers who arrested him.

Equal opportunity was the subject of Obama's State of the Union address in January and, in it, he cited two examples. The first was Misty DeMars, a white woman from a Chicago suburb who counts among the long-term unemployed. The second was Estiven Rodriguez, a 17-year-old student from New York who immigrated to the US as a nine-year-old from the Dominican Republic without speaking a word of English.

DeMars was meant to represent the difficulty women face in advancing their careers. And Rodriguez served as an example of how immigrants can succeed when given the chance.

He didn't mention a single black person in his speech.