

RACIAL STRIFE AND THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

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To end racial strife, we must understand the history that motivates each of us. I learned this from a personal encounter while growing up. I met Ben Chaney. We bunked together as teenagers at a special camp: The Shaker Village Work Group, where teens from all walks of life came together over a summer to learn both self-sufficiency and social cooperation by running and governing a real village together. Ben and I did not become close. We did not keep in touch. We were just two idealistic teenagers whose paths happened to cross. Yet, I was shocked to read years later in college that Ben had been convicted of robbery and murder. According to the news articles, Ben and two others had hijacked a car in Florida and killed the two occupants. They then drove north, robbed a novelty store in South Carolina and killed the proprietor. It is still hard to believe I met someone who could do this. How could our paths have diverged so completely?

But then I remembered. Ben's brother, James Earl Chaney, was tortured and murdered by conspirators who included members of his home county's sheriff's office, his home city's police department, a local preacher, and other "pillars" of his local community. They did this because James and two associates from Long Island (Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner) were working to register blacks to vote, a basic civil right then denied blacks all over the south and Mississippi in particular. Shortly after the murders, Ben and his family were also forced by death threats to flee the south.

The government of Ben's home state, Mississippi, refused to prosecute the perpetrators. They were therefore tried in Federal court where, limited to Federal Law, they were convicted only of violating the civil rights of the three murdered individuals. None served more than six years; less than half the time Ben served for his crimes. It would be 37 years before the State of Mississippi tried and convicted the ring leader, Edgar Ray Killen, but only of manslaughter. He was already 80 years old.

Notably, eight other bodies of missing blacks were also found during the FBI-led search for Ben's missing brother and his white associates. None of their disappearances had drawn the kind of national attention sparked by that of James, Andrew, and Michael. Could this be because Andrew and Michael were white?

Given all of this, I believe that Ben came to feel completely disenfranchised from U.S. society. Neither our laws nor our institutions had protected his family when they needed it. Clearly, there can be no meaningful rule of law when laws are applied in such arbitrary and capricious ways. I do not condone what Ben did. Attacking innocents because you yourself have been attacked can never be condoned. But perhaps it can be understood – and prevented.

A past in which blacks were killed by whites with impunity is not ancient history. It is within my lifetime and the lifetimes of the parents of many black teens alive today. Is it therefore so hard for whites to appreciate the consternation that blacks feel when black youths are killed today with those responsible receiving little or no punishment?

Two nights ago, I saw the film, "Fruitvale Station" about the killing of Oscar Grant. I wondered about the frequency with which unarmed blacks and whites are killed by authorities after being detained under circumstances where no crime is suspected. I could uncover no formal statistics on such incidents. Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests a horrific record. In the year following Trayvon Martin's death, more than 100 unarmed blacks were apparently killed by authority figures under such circumstances, with little or no punishment of the perpetrators. In contrast, incidents involving the killing of white youths are nearly impossible to find, which suggests they are rare.

Reports of high rates of violent crime in some black communities can make whites nervous around blacks. But, when an unarmed black youth detained under non-violent circumstances is killed by authorities, crime rates in black neighborhoods should have little bearing on a jury's deliberations. The rates at which blacks kill blacks should also have no bearing. Reflection is needed, and a balance struck to show that we value equally the right to life of all members of our society.

I've sometimes thought that, if Ben would let me, I would like to write his biography. I believe my perspective on the tragedy in which he participated is unique. It's a perspective I wanted to share on this 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.